

From Darkness, Light
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Summary: The Tribe is set to return to the galaxy and once more begin the dominion of the Sith. Vestara Khai, the Sith Saber responsible for that rise, is caught between inter-Tribe politics and pressures she has placed upon herself. Will her dream of a just Empire of the Sith be a mere fantasy, or will she rise above it and start a chain of events that will change the galaxy forever?

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1. Chapter 1

From Darkness, Light

Praise circumstances for the time of your birth, young one. For you will know the honor and responsibilities and delights of being among the first in five millennia to leave Kesh...to take your place in ruling a Sith galaxy.

-Sith Master Olaris Rhea of the Lost Tribe

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Sith Saber Vestara Khai remained emotionless as she listened to the Circle of Lords from her seat on the perimeter of the Circle Chambers. Her victory almost two years earlier had brought her much accolades at first, but those accolades slowly turned her into the 'go-to' target for the lesser Lords and Ladies trying to get ahead on the council. Having only recently ascended to Saber, she had been ill-equipped for such political fencing. Needless to say, that despite Ship still remaining loyal to her, she had lost much more than she had gained. Her failings were something she was bitterly aware of, her father's lecture of *'If you were not ready to spar with Lords and Ladies, then perhaps you should have remembered that before accepting the Grand Lord's assignment. Hubris has been the end of many, and it looks like it will be your own downfall as well'* echoing loudly in her mind.

Despite the rousing success of her initial mission, subsequent campaigns for supplies, fuel, and technology had fallen to the very vultures she had fought so hard to best. Even her next mission had been conducted under the supervision of a Sith Master, no thanks to her father's political machinations within the Circle of Lords. Machinations she was fast learning to adapt to if she wanted to remain relevant in the decision making of the Tribe.

"Grand Lord," Lord Ysabria Kaladris, Grand Lord Darish Vol's most trusted advisor, stood to speak. "The time is nearly at hand to return the Tribe to the galaxy and once again establish the Sith Empire our forbearers dreamed of. The question the Lords and Ladies of this circle have time and time again fenced around is who will have the esteemed honor to lead our fleets into battle."

"You have a recommendation, Lord Kaladris?"

"Yes, Grand Lord." The dark-skinned human steeped his fingers as he inclined his head. "Both High Lord Taalon, and High Lady Sashal have repeatedly distinguished themselves above their peers. As the number of ships under our command is sizable indeed, I recommend we give each control of half the fleet. They will, of course, remain answerable to you, Grand Lord. When it comes to tactical decisions, you will have the final say."

Vestara reined in her emotions the best she could. It should have been her to command at least part of the fleet. She was the reason why the Tribe had any sort of fleet to begin with. From being responsible for finding parts to repair the *Omen*, to raiding fuel shipments to fuel the ships the Tribe had captured. All of it had been made possible because Ship had chosen *her*. Had advised the Tribe and was instrumental to their success. To deny her a place of honor...

Patience, Ship's voice echoed in the back of her mind. *Draw no attention to yourself. Your time will come.*

The dark-haired Kesh native slowly unclenched her chair's armrests, her blue eyes blazing with silent rage.

"Saber Khai, it looks as if you have something to say," Lord Yuvar Xal commented neutrally, green eyes slanting her way. Despite his relatively innocent statement, Vestara knew that he was one of the players working against her. As he had intended, the eyes of the Circle of Lords were once again on her. "Has Ship provided you with any insight on this matter?"

Vestara choked back her biting retort, unwilling to let the Sith Master know he was getting to her. She instead folded her hands in her lap and let a small smile tug on her lips. The scar she had obtained from her fight with the Jedi Skywalker gave her gesture a more menacing slant. "Lord Xal, I assure you. If Ship wished for any of her insight to be shared with you, you'd be the last to know."

"Could have just said 'no'," Yuvar shrugged uncaringly. "I merely thought that you'd want command of a part of the fleet yourself. After all, you were responsible for bringing us the first ships for our fleet."

Vestara's eyes narrowed. "My time will come, Lord Xal. I am sure that High Lord Taalon and High Lady Sashal are more than capable of managing the fleet. Mastering several thousand years of space combat strategy through theory and simulators is not my idea of

fun."

This caused several in the circle to chuckle.

The Grand Lord waved Yuvar off. "Leave the girl alone, Lord Xal. She has performed her service to the Tribe and knows her station."

Patience, Ship reminded her again. Vestara let out several short, calming breaths, through her forced smile, well aware that the Circle was still watching her. "You honor me, Grand Lord."

"You will of course inform this Circle should Ship have anything pertinent to say?" Darish Vol added.

"Of course. For the Tribe," Vestara bowed her head.

The meeting went on, assignments and sectors divvied up by the Circle. The more prestigious tasks—those engaging the Jedi directly, or leading a portion of the fleet to capture a specific objective, or even establishing Tribe colonies on other worlds—were given to those the Grand Lord favored most. Tasks like rear-guard action, supply-convoy duty, or even staying on Kesh to manage things while everyone else went off to fight, were given to those least favored.

Vestara purposefully kept her Force presence blank as her assignment was given to her. It was only due to the fact that she still held favor with her old master, Lady Orlaris Rhea, and High Lord Takaris Yur that she wasn't assigned to Kesh. Her own father had voted for her to remain behind, claiming that she was too young and ignorant of politicking and war to be involved.

Her childhood friend's remark about knowing who she'd choose as a sacrifice had they still practiced the old ways couldn't have rung louder at that moment.

"Lords, Ladies," High Lord Takaris Yur spoke. As he did, as was usual, the room went quiet. He had risen to his post not from personal ambition or treachery, but because he tended to back the right Tyros, Sabers, and Masters, and was rewarded well for his support. His words were dissected and analyzed several times over, because everyone knew that his support meant someone was destined to rise. Conversely, it also meant that the rise would come at someone's expense. "I believe we should grant Saber Khai the right to join her brothers and sisters in battle. We are but one planet and will need all the able-bodied fighters in our retinue if we are to

succeed. She has proven herself to the Tribe, has shed blood for it. Do any of you have a reason against her fighting for the Tribe?"

Worded as it was, no one challenged the High Lord's position.

"Very well, we will assign her a troop-transport," the Grand Lord said dismissively. "As one of the only one of us who has gone up against Jedi and survived, she will be of great use to us on the frontlines."

"And what of the Meditation Sphere?" Another voiced.

"It will travel along with us. Though its technology is old, its weaponry is still quite lethal," High Lord Taalon said aloud. "If we are to establish a new Sith Empire, it is only fitting vestige of the old bear witness to our return."

"Pardon me, High Lord Taalon," Lady Rhea spoke up. "But the Meditation Sphere only responds to my apprentice. You cannot relegate her to a troop transport and have the ship in battle at the same time."

"Then it will be in the cargo-hold of my flag," Grand Lord Vol said waspishly. "Either way, it will come with us. But your apprentice will *not* set foot on it in this campaign."

Vestara remained silent. On one hand she was relieved that she'd again be leaving Kesh. On the other, she knew that the Grand Lord and those against her were expecting her to be among the first to die for the Tribe. Not that she was adverse to the idea, she just didn't want to die because of the political machinations of the Circle.

As the meeting wound down, final details being ironed out and last-minute political battles fought, Vestara silently stood and left the room. She knew that nothing more would be accomplished, and that staying would only invite others to target her once more.

Inside she was seething. Again her fate had been decided not by her own strength, but because someone else had intervened on her behalf. She was nearly seventeen now, she was Sith, and if her passions were incapable of giving her the strength she needed to defeat her enemies...

She trailed off at the thought. If it wasn't enough, then what?

"Saber Khai."

"Saber Raas," Vestara smiled darkly as she turned to face her childhood sparring partner. Despite a few dates after the success of her first mission, she felt very little other than a faint friendship with the Keshiri she had grown up alongside with. Social status notwithstanding, as he was a lowly Keshiri and she a pure-human Sith, she had just never felt the same for him as he obviously did for her.

Given the level of pride they both had, the breakup had not been amicable at all.

"Still have your head," the Keshiri Sith remarked. In past times, that might have been meant humorously, a statement said between friends in jest. But this time Ahri's almost bitter disappointment bled through his forced smile.

"Not for your master's lack of trying."

"I just heard from Master Xal," Ahri said with pride. "I am to serve on his flagship, the *Dark Blade*. The giant triangle vessel you captured."

"It is called a Star Destroyer, Saber Raas," Vestara remarked, sighing and wondering when Ahri would get to his point. "A *Victory*-class. We are about to invade the galaxy, the least you can do is learn the proper names for their war-machines."

"When they are ours, we can call them whatever we please," Ahri laughed dismissively. "I assume someone of your fame managed to get an assignment on the *Omen* itself."

"Do you really expect the Grand Lord to welcome me on his flag?" Vestara remarked caustically.

"He likes to keep an eye on his enemies," Ahri shrugged.

"Apparently, I don't register as a threat," Vestara said bitterly. "I am to serve under Master Tola Annax in the ground forces. We are to be deployed from the frigate *Starstalker*."

"The honor of personally killing the enemy is a great one," Ahri's white eyebrows shot up.

"So is obliterating a whole unit of ground soldiers with a single

turbolaser," Vestara remarked. "Dead is dead, doesn't matter how. Only, I am not afforded the protection of a Type-Seven Kuati-made shield generator and several meters of armored plating."

"If you're serving under Master Annax, you'll run into a few familiar faces," Ahri said, ignoring her comment. "Both Sabers Vran and Kaara were assigned to her as well."

"You are very well informed for someone who wasn't at the meeting."

"I am well loved by the Circle," Ahri replied lightly.

"Favor comes and goes, Ahri," Vestara answered back. "Trust me, I know. You weren't waiting for me outside the Circle Chambers just to boast, Ahri. What do you want?"

"You left before my master could ask. But do you plan to take the Jedi with you or put him down?"

Vestara arched a single eyebrow. "Yes."

"Yes? You'll kill him or take him with you?"

"Since when was Master Xal interested in my property?" Vestara parried. "What I do with my slave is of no concern to him. I captured the Jedi and by right he is mine. Keshiri and Circle Law agree on that point."

"Yes, but he is a Jedi," Ahri pressed. "We cannot take the chance that he'll escape and tell his people all he's learned from us."

"He's had many chances to escape, to kill me, he has not," Vestara answered. "I will not let fear and uncertainty rule my actions."

"Master Xal was right. The Jedi has poisoned your mind, made you weak."

"Then your master should have nothing to fear from me," Vestara sighed, waving him off and gaining several steps on him. "I grow tired of this Ahri. Are you done being your master's ack dog?"

"There's still time to reconsider my offer." This time the friendliness was gone from his voice. "We would be a great team, Vestara. I have but to tell my master that you've reconsidered our relationship and you will be with me on his flag for the coming war. All you

have to do is agree to be my..."

"Saber Raas," Vestara said tersely, stopping in her tracks and controlling her breathing. "I will never be 'your' anything. I have made that clear several times over. I will serve the Tribe however it deems I should. Whether that is in Ship, on the ground, or in a cruiser of my own. But I will *never* stoop to your levels to get ahead."

Ahri's face became stony. "You are making a great mistake, Vestara. My master and myself are part of the fastest rising faction on Kesh. It would best for you to be on our good side and enjoy the luxuries that entails. If not...well, the scar that mars the beauty on your face will only be the beginning of your problems."

Vestara's eyes flashed yellow as she spun towards him. "The influence that you and your master hold is only good so long as you're alive. Do not test me, Saber Raas. You are Keshiri and will always be lower than the true members of the Tribe. When I rise and take my father's spot, you best remember what *I* will do for those who opposed *me*."

Not letting Ahri say another word, Vestara stalked off, her Force energies radiating 'danger' to anyone who dared approach her.

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Her bad mood continued as she stormed through the front doors of her family's manor, her rage and frustrations hiding the hurt and fear. The household serving staff quickly hurried out of the way, none of them wanting to test an enraged Sith. Their cowardice only fueled her anger, her booted feet clicking loudly on the marble flooring, announcing her path.

He will learn his place. Ship relayed

Vestara mentally agreed, several painful scenarios for Ahri playing out in her mind. In their youth they had always been play-rivals at best, both working to strengthen the other. Ahri had the disadvantage of being Keshiri, seen as a lesser race on the human-minority dominated world. Regardless of his Force abilities and martial prowess, the very biological fact that he was Keshiri meant that he was lower than her in Kesh society. Furthermore, due to the fact that her family could trace its lineage all the way back to one of the ranking Sith during the crash five thousand years ago, she was several tiers higher than most humans on the planet. When she

had first met Ahri, her own family hadn't been as favored due to them being at odds with the Grand Lord, and she and Ahri had teamed up to make the Tribe acknowledge their worth.

But times changed. Vestara's own father used her successful campaigns for his own gain, advancing into the Circle and gaining favor from the Grand Lord. Ahri's strength and ambitions had been noted by Yuvar Xal, a member of a powerful faction in the Circle, and he had promptly taken to his new role and position in Kesh society. Where her fame and fortunes diminished as multiple factions and actors within the Circle worked to limit her influence, Ahri's stock rose.

She burst into her home's library through one last set of doors, the wooden panels rocking back in their frames. The one person on the planet who wasn't cowed by her, wasn't planning some ulterior plot to advance himself, wasn't looking to stab her in the back at first opportunity, looked up mildly from the book he was reading.

"Told you so," the Jedi Master she had 'captured' on her first mission said in greeting. During his 'stay' at her place, he had quickly caught on to Keshiri Basic, the language that had developed over the five millennia since the *Omen* had been marooned on the planet. In turn, she had also learned and refined her 'modern' Basic with him and was almost just as fluent.

"Don't!" Vestara snarled in Keshiri Basic, the word sounding more like '*din*' to a modern Basic speaker. She held up the pain-device for the shock-collar he wore. "I'm not in the mood, slave!" '*Em na enzi felit, sla'e!*'

"This makes it, what? The fifth time I've predicted what would happen in the meeting? Or was it the seventh? I've lost track."

Vestara snarled and depressed the button, dropping the Jedi Master from the chair in a spasming wreck. She switched to modern Basic. "I said I wasn't in the mood. Damn it! Why do you make me do this!?"

Once she released the button, the Jedi Master calmly climbed back into the chair, feeling no fear or even anger towards her. "Got it out of your system?"

The feeling of pity, of sympathy, it made her sick. She threw the remote aside and stormed up to him, grabbing the collar of his rough-hewn tunic. Despite the fact that he had at least fifty

kilograms and nearly sixty centimeters on her, the Force assisted her as she hauled him out of the chair. "Hawe!? How could you predict the outcome so many times! How could you know my people better than myself?"

Do not concern yourself with the Jedi, he is...

"Oh shut up," the Jedi sighed, a Force pulse coursing through the room. "Kriff, how can you stand to have that thing connected to you?"

Vestara jerked as Ship's words died mid-sentence. Aside from the fact that his collar was also supposed to suppress his Force-usage, this was the first time her link to the sentient vessel had even been dampened. "What... What did you do?"

"Took a while to work it out," Doran Sarkin-Tainer, shrugged. He picked up the book he had been reading off the floor and set it on the nearby table. "Helps your dad built this giant library celebrating the power of the Sith."

"How can you even use the Force?" Vestara stammered, pressing her hand into his chest.

"Neural disruptor tech has advanced quite a bit," Doran tapped on the collar. "The model your people mass-reproduce has a slight flaw. Though it will initially dampen the ability to use the Force, if one adapts to the energy output and knows alternative methods of Force-using, then the collar becomes a heavy piece of jewelry. And to answer your next question, I've been able to use the Force after my fifth month here."

Vestara's jaw dropped and she released his shirt, backing up several steps. "Fifth month...You've been here for over a year and a half! How come you've stayed? I know you are a powerful Jedi, and clever too."

"Thank you," Doran smiled warmly. "I've stayed because I wanted to. I find this planet and your people...interesting. In my youth I zoomed around the galaxy finding ancient holocrons and talking to Force-users from eras long past. Finding an entire civilization built upon the precepts of the Sith Empire at its heyday is an opportunity I couldn't pass up."

"Again for knowledge," Vestara accepted.

"That, and it looked like you could use a friend."

Vestara regard him warily. "Friend?"

"Yup," Doran replied cheerfully. "Tell me the talks we've had since my coming here haven't been fun?"

"I practically shocked you in every conversation," Vestara said in disbelief, pointing to the discarded remote.

"The truth hurts. When pain and deception are the only things you are familiar with, facing something new can be scary."

"I am *not* afraid."

"Not anymore. But when we first started talking you believed that every word out of my mouth was a lie. That the galaxy couldn't possibly be flourishing under the Jedi, or that the Jedi way had any merits. You saw me as a foolish idealist who was ignorant of the dark side and lacking any ambition."

"I got most of that right," Vestara countered. "You still lack ambition and you definitely are a foolish idealist."

"But I have never once lied, omitted, or hid the truth from you regardless of whether the truth would make you zap me," Doran pointed out.

Vestara looked away, feeling the tears she had been trying to keep at bay slowly escape her tight control. "The Grand Lord and others are blinded by their greed. I am the *only* person with modern-day combat experience, who's actually been in ship-to-ship battles! They're giving command of the fleet *I* acquired to two members of the Circle who've spent most of their time on Kesh overseeing the military and police units. Their pride and ambition are going to doom the Tribe, and there's *nothing* I can do about it."

"Staying alive would be a good start," Doran pointed out patiently, walking to the window to give Vestara some semblance of privacy. "Let me guess...frontline soldier or fighter pilot?"

"Frontline," Vestara emitted a sobbing laugh, shaking her head. "Again, how'd you even know?"

"Student of history," Doran offered her a kind smile. "Success that comes to those who do not truly earn it breeds envy and contempt."

You never earned Ship, it chose you. That made you special in the eyes of others, made you a threat. What if the people rallied around you and Ship? What if, you gained enough support to make the Circle moot? The thousands of years of tradition and order would have been thrown out the window for what? A neophyte Saber? Some might empathize with you, see you as the opportunity the Tribe needs to be great once more. That will only harden the ill-will, only prove their suspicions right. You might believe in a Sith Empire with the Tribe at the top. A great goal, really. The guys like the Grand Lord, however, can only see a Sith Empire with *them* at the top."

"There's a difference?" Vestara sniffled, wiping at her eyes.

"You know there is. You have a saying, 'For the Tribe'. The guys and gals with big egos who decide everything, hear 'for you, my lord' every single time."

"What do I do now?" Vestara whispered softly, unwilling to look in the Jedi's direction. Bereft of allies, of anyone who she could truly trust, she couldn't believe she had voiced the question to her slave.

"Look at it from another point of view. The guys that assigned themselves the cushy ships, whoever's taken over that Star Destroyer, have made themselves fantastic targets. You only have five cruisers, a dreadnaught, and more frigates than I was able to count," Doran answered.

"Two-hundred and eighteen," Vestara supplied.

"Two-hundred and eighteen frigates. Your cruisers and dreadnaught are the backbone of your navy, and any competent military force will know to target them first. After all, no lowly leader of a Sith Empire is going to be caught dead on a frigate. Destroy the leadership, destroy the opposition's organization."

"How does that help me?"

"You, you have the opportunity to move in the background. To win over your fellow ground-troopers and gain a following. Believe me, nothing earns respect faster than fighting in a life-or-death battle at someone's side. Hardly anyone these days pays attention to the ground forces. Even in the rest of the galaxy, the glory of fighting in ship-to-ship combat is what's broadcasted in the movies and in the propaganda. You're a Saber, you'll have command of a bunch of Tyros, right?"

"Depends on what Master Annax feels like."

"Insist upon it," Doran advised. "They don't even have to be the best or brightest. The most important thing is that you keep as many of them alive as possible. Earn their trust and loyalty. When the more competent Tyros see that you care for those under you, they'll be more willing to work with you. Your fellow Sabers might be mad as Kessel for your popularity, show them your secret."

"What? Why would I do that?"

"Everyone who mimics you will be seen as a poor copy," Doran answered. "The difference between you and most of the other Tribe I've seen so far is that you truly care and believe in your vision of an empire ruled by the Tribe. Hard to have an empire if you get the foundation and its future killed off. Your successes will draw the attention of the other Masters. They might send you on suicide missions to try and nip your influence before it spreads. Like I said earlier, your main goal will be to live no matter what indignity you might face. Those who go with you will be expected to die as well, convince them that the Tribe will be poorer for their deaths. This time, when you return, you'll have earned the respect of not only those who were on the fence about you, but your enemies in the Circle as well. They'll truly see that the Force is with you and when they start taking you seriously, so will your allies in the Circle."

"I half expected you to convince me to defect to the Jedi once we return to the galaxy," Vestara chuckled, shaking her head. "You continue to surprise me, master Jedi."

"The Tribe is your family, I get it," Doran shook his head with a small smirk. "I know all about different types of family, how you stick by them even if they're dundering bucket-heads with a penchant for suicidal impulses."

"The Mandalorians," Vestara nodded, remembering some of the many stories he had regaled her with over his time in servitude.

"Yup. You choose who you want as a family, as friends. Me telling you to go to the Jedi would be like me telling you who your family should be. As flawed as the Tribe can be, it's still your family."

Vestara smiled softly, rubbing at her eyes and surprised at how open she was being. She briefly checked her mental defenses in case the Jedi had done anything, but it was more out of reflex than actual suspicion. The check also revealed something else.

"While we're on the topic of truth-telling, what did you do to my connection to Ship?"

"You want it back?" Doran raised an eyebrow.

"Yes...no...maybe," Vestara again looked away. In the almost two years since forming that bond, she had come to rely on Ship's advice, Ship's whispers in the back of her head reassuring her that he dream was still alive. Though Ship had an annoying habit of sometimes hijacking her words or actions if she began to behave contrary to what the vessel wanted, it was still an odd source of comfort to her.

"I'm projecting a passive field of Force energy attuned to the EM and Force spectrum used by Force-sensitive machines," Doran explained. "If you weave it into your Force-presence, you can subconsciously generate the field and not worry about it disappearing when you sleep."

"This is tech-Force stuff, right? Like how you showed me how to manipulate the servant droids and security equipment?"

"Same basic concept, bigger picture."

"Teach me," Vestara demanded.

"Think bubble of Force energy using the tech-Force. Rather than directing the energy into the droid or machine you want to affect, make it surround you. It'll take a bit of trial and error as you have to attune yourself to the exact frequency Ship is using and then run a counter-frequency to cancel her messages out. Kind of like a self-contained Faraday cage. I can point out a couple of books in this library that will help you narrow down the energies Ship is using. Take it with you on those boring hyperspace journeys."

Vestara consented with a nod. One of the reasons why she had kept him alive, aside from the stories he told that helped her mind fill in the picture of how the galaxy had changed during her Tribe's absence, was that he also instructed her in the ways of the Force. He never asked for anything in turn, seemed to enjoy helping her achieve new skills. Some techniques she picked up quickly, others seemed impossibly difficult. And she kept every ability he taught her a secret. As far as the rest of the Tribe knew, he was an example of Jedi weakness, half-mad with delusion of peace and serenity. If they knew what she had learned, she knew that the Circle would take the Jedi for their own gain and again leave her with nothing.

"I will practice when I have the time. As useful as Ship is, it sometimes goes beyond what I require of it. Learning to block out its affects will definitely be beneficial."

"Just a warning," Doran tapped the book he had been reading. "From all accounts your people have recorded. If you block out the Meditation Sphere too often or too long, the bond will break and it will seek someone else. If it can't mould you into the tool that will help it accomplish its programming, you're no longer any use to it."

"Thank you for the warning," Vestara tilted her head. She wondered briefly if the loss of the Meditation Sphere would actually hurt at all. Ship had been vital to her confidence and success early on, but its ability to forcefully guide her actions if she began to deviate from what it had planned was more than a little far as she was concerned, the Tribe's leadership blamed her for being chosen by the Sphere and only tolerated her presence in the Circle chamber because of her connection to the antique vessel.

The atmosphere changed as she sensed her father draw near. Immediately her emotional barriers and icy cold demeanor returned. She took a step away from the Jedi, wiping away any sign that she had been crying with her sleeve.

"Vestara?" She heard her father's voice from the foyer.

"In here," Vestara said emotionlessly, her light brown eyes cooling completely.

Doran smiled sympathetically and once more took his seat, picking up the book he had been reading earlier. He gestured with his other hand at the collar remote she had thrown. She briefly held out a hand and summoned it, giving him no acknowledgment for his assistance.

Seconds later, Circle of Lords member Gavar Khai entered the room. He was not a big man, nor was he unremarkable. Radiating strength like most members of the Tribe

"My slave was reading to me about the nature of Ship," Vestara gestured to Doran. "I was curious as to what it would do since the Circle saw fit to deny me access to it."

"Daughter."

"Father." Vestara revealed nothing. She had assumed that her father

had his reasons for acting against her in the Circle of Lords, and she was fine with that. If she was incapable of seeing his betrayal of her for personal gain, then she deserved what had come. But she no longer felt love towards the man who had sired her.

"What I did was to protect you," Gavar exhaled, no doubt sensing her hostility.

"By having me remain behind? By setting the other factions against me?" Vestara hissed. "Or was it when you voiced a lack of confidence in my abilities only a few weeks after I had returned with the Star Destroyer and other vessels for the Tribe? Had Sith Masters supervise my other missions and take credit for the successes of myself and Ship. When father? When were you protecting me? Why do you think I needed protection in the first place?"

"Foolish child! Grand Lord Vol was plotting your assassination!" Gavar snarled back. "With you dead, he would then force the Meditation Sphere to acknowledge him and his power. If you continued to stand out, continued to make him look foolish with your successes, continued to be a threat to his power, you would have been killed!"

"What?" Vestara blinked wildly.

"Idiot," Gavar snapped. "Even your slave saw the threat the first week he was on this planet. Convinced your mother of the danger, and she in turn told me."

Vestara spun back around to Doran, who was studiously reading the book in his hands. "You?"

"He was right. You have your mother to thank for saving your life. She was the one who came up with the plan to minimize your efforts and your profile on the Circle. That doing so would convince the Grand Lord you weren't worth the effort and that he could establish the Tribe as the pre-eminent power in the galaxy without the Meditation Sphere."

"But...You ascended to the Circle of Lords when..."

"Think, daughter! I raised no fool. Yes, I acquired my position at your expense, but it is because I now sit in the Circle of Lords that I could redirect its attention away from you. And then you had to clumsily form your own alliances, have Master Rhea and High Lord

Yur back your efforts to regain prominence in the Tribe. You could have been safe on this planet, protected by the Meditation Sphere and away from the fighting and attention of Grand Lord Vol!"

"I don't want to be safely locked away! I want to serve the Tribe, shed my blood for it if need be just like all of my brothers and sisters on this planet!" Vestara yelled.

"If you had stayed, you would have also preserved the life of your 'slave'," Gavar replied shaking his head. "The order for his execution was agreed upon by the Circle just after you left. Apparently you gave the apprentice of Lord Xal some affront and he dropped all opposition to the plan."

Vestara heard Doran hum what suspiciously sounded like 'I told you so' under his breath as he perused his book.

"You're so smart, master Jedi. What's your plan to get out of this one?" Vestara snarked, ignoring her father's presence.

"Always two there are. Well, in the Jedi case, a lot more, but in general practice there's two," Doran muttered, as if reciting some school book. "A master and an apprentice."

"Your apprentice..." Vestara paused, vaguely recalling the shorter female Jedi he had tricked into leaving the ship. Or had he? She opened her mouth to ask him just that, but he motioned towards her father with his eyes. With an annoyed huff, she gripped the remote and shocked him once more. "Foolish idiot, I might as well let them kill you."

"You cannot hide your fondness of him from me, daughter."

"I assume the execution will take place soon?" Vestara turned back to her father, her face impassive.

"By week's end. It's going to be public. The Grand Lord wishes to show the others he still has power over you after what occurred in the meeting."

"Remind me to kill Ahri later," Vestara said under her breath. "Public, meaning the amphitheater?"

"As part of the feasts and celebrations to mark our official return to the galaxy," Gavar nodded.

"Hear that, slave?" Vestara pressed the shock-collar button once more, noting that the Jedi was writhing in pain a lot more than when she usually shocked him. She ended the treatment and flipped him onto his back with the toe of her boot. "I did not hear any response. You are going to be executed tomorrow evening surrounded by legions of the Tribe, far from your family and friends. What have you to say about that?"

"There is no death, only the Force," Doran replied, giving her a brief wink unseen by her father.

Vestara felt a weight lift off her chest that she hadn't realized had been present. "I don't suppose the Grand Lord will send someone to pick him up now? I am tired of his senile babbling."

"That would be akin to him doing you a favor," Gavar raised a skeptically eyebrow. "I do not believe he will accept your sudden change of heart. You fought quite hard to keep him in your possession when the spoils of war were being divided, and there is a rumor you use him for more...carnal means."

She heard the Jedi repress a snigger and she used kicking him once more as an excuse to hide her sudden rush of embarrassment. "Father, I can promise you that no Jedi will ever touch me. Why would I ever bed one weaker and inferior to myself?"

"I said there are rumors. I did not say I believed them," Gavar said with some amusement. "It is a father's prerogative to embarrass his daughter after all."

"I only kept him around because he was knowledgeable about the galaxy we are returning to."

"The Circle has appreciated your reports and have taken detailed notes. It was part of the reason they were willing to let you keep him. As he has developed a trust in you, they thought you'd learn more than their methods."

"I know, they use me for their goals and give none of the accolades I am due," Vestara returned sarcastically.

Gavar shook his head. "If you are truly apathetic to his living or dying, then I would kill him yourself and deny the Grand Lord satisfaction."

"Or let him kill the slave and see how completely unaffected I am. I

might even thank him afterwards."

"Or that," Gavar sighed. "Step carefully, daughter. Off of Kesh, my ability to shield you from the Circle's plots is greatly diminished, and without the Meditation Sphere, you are without your greatest support."

Vestara straightened, shaking her head and smirking once more. "Father, I am Saber Vestara Khai of the Tribe. Regardless of the challenges before me, I will overcome them all, the Force will free me."

DL-III-DL

Vestara fondly ran a hand through the red and black ruff of her pet Uvak, allowing the semi-sentient dragon-like being to eat from her hand. "The time is nearing, Tikk. I leave very soon. I am not permitted to bring you with me."

The reptavian, slightly bigger than her own form, nuzzled her in turn, emitting a small rawring noise.

"None but the beast-riders among the Keshiri guard are allowed to bring their Uvak," Vestara replied, shaking her head. She could feel the beast's feelings just as much as it could feel her own. Having imprinted herself on Tikk before it had even hatched from his egg, the Uvar was fanatically loyal to her and one of the few living beings she could say for certain wouldn't betray her.

Tikk whimpered and nudged her with its head once more.

"Stop that," Vestara scolded. "You are my Uvak, show some dignity. If this is to be our final farewell, then so be it."

It growled and bumped her hand so that the rest of the food she was holding fell to the ground.

Vestara arched an eyebrow. "Not all of my family is going. My mother will be assisting the Circle Lord unfortunate enough to stay behind in keeping this planet secure. You *will* behave for her, or she has my permission to put you down. If you cannot benefit the Tribe, you are no longer needed. That has always been the way of our people and it won't change if I go away."

Tikk growled and promptly turned away from Vestara, stalking back towards its stables.

"Be that way!" Vestara called out, throwing the saddle and riding equipment that had been slung over her shoulders to the ground. She held out a hand, and the Uvak stopped in its tracks. It shuddered as her will was imposed over her own, and then turned around and walked back to her. "I offered you a chance to live in luxury while I was away, but you apparently don't appreciate the things I do for you either."

There was a surge of Force energy, and the Uvak staggered backwards, its hind legs failing it and causing it to fall back on its haunches. It looked at Vestara in complete bewilderment, confused as to what had just happened.

"Go," Vestara barked, gesturing with her hand. "I have severed our bond. You are free. Go!"

The Uvak blinked its green eyes at Vestara, shaking its head as if to clear it.

"Go!" Vestara snarled, adding the Force to her command. She pulled her parang clear, the glass blade reflecting the twin moons above.

Even with the command, the Uvak seemed completely lost. For its entire six years it had grown up with its bond to Vestara as its guiding focus. It had eaten, slept, and spent every waking hour a slave to her will. Now without that focus, it had no idea what to do with the freedom given to it.

"Go," Vestara repeated softly, a single tear escaping. "Go or I will have to put you down myself. This planet does not accept weakness. If you are so incapable of living without my will..."

Tikk made a growling squawk noise of incomprehension, making no move to take wing.

Stepping forward, Vestara cupped the creature's head, gazing into its intelligent green eyes. "Go, live your own life now. I will most likely never return to Kesh. You are no longer needed."

The glass parang shone in the night as she placed it against the creature's neck.

"Last chance Tikk," Vestara whispered hoarsely. "Show me the same honor I have shown you and fly off now. Do not force my hand."

But still the beast stayed, its own gaze trying to discern Vestara's

thoughts without the link to guide it.

Vestara closed her eyes, her one hand moving in a quick, swift, stroke. She felt hot blood pour her hands, could feel the spark of life vacate the creature she had cared for and nurtured since she had first been selected as Tyro. She felt the large beast shudder as it breathed its last, its body twitching once before falling limp. She released her grip on it, heard it thump lifelessly to the ground.

She stepped away, gazing impassively at the corpse.

"Very good, daughter," Gavar Khai said approvingly, stepping forward. "You know as well as I that the creature would have gone mad without your presence. Best dispatch it now, spare it from future suffering."

"Of course," Vestara replied simply, cleaning the blade off with a piece of cloth. "You should probably summon mother. She will be able to make a hefty profit from the beast's skin and meat at the market."

"You should probably say farewell to that Jedi slave of yours," Gavar advised. "After all, by this time tomorrow he will have been publicly executed."

"He is of no consequence," Vestara's tone remained emotionless, her mental barriers allowing no iota of feeling through. She began to head back towards the estate. "If he is to die tonight or tomorrow it does not matter to me. I'll soon be on a ship heading away from this planet and he, like the Uvak, are reminders that the strong survive and the weak perish. It was the way of our people long before we came to this planet, and it will be the backbone from which the Sith Empire will be built upon."

"If you are certain, daughter," Gavar shrugged apathetically. "He did wish me to convey his good fortune to you for your endeavors in creating that Sith Empire."

"He is a slave," Vestara repeated dismissively. In her heart, however, she couldn't help but feel a gnawing guilt. Slave or not, the Jedi had helped her so much. A Khai did not like being indebted to anyone, even a slave. But there was nothing she could do lest she throw away her own future, the future she had in mind for her people, for a single being. "If I thought it wouldn't invite more trouble, I'd have gotten rid of him when you informed me of the Grand Lord's plans."

"Very well, then go get washed up. Lord Yuvar Xal and his apprentice have invited us to a strategy meeting concerning our first targets. Though arriving blood-soaked and murderous might prove memorable, I do not think that is the impression we need to make tonight."

Vestara glanced down at her hands and robes, both slick with Uvak blood. "A bloodless change would be good."

Gavar chuckled. "I do not think that is the change the Circle of Lords have in mind when we return to the galaxy."

"For the Tribe, father."

"For the Tribe."

DL-IV-DL

A part of Vestara was infuriated that she was worried so much over the fate of her slave. It was not fitting for a Sith of the Tribe, nor was being annoyed over the fact that Ahri might have been right in saying the Jedi had made her soft. It was all she could do not to pace endlessly in her room. It wouldn't have been becoming of her to do so. Instead, she had to carry on as if the Jedi's life meant nothing to her. The Grand Lord's security forces had taken him at first light on the day of the ceremonies, and had been more than a little put out by how eager she had seemed to get rid of the slave.

Serves the blasted Jedi right. It was entirely his fault he was in his current situation after all.

At that thought, Vestara nodded to herself. Right, if the fool hadn't surrendered to the Tribe's forces, he would have gotten away without incident. In fact, all he had to do was step through the airlock and he would have been home free. Instead, he did the Jedi thing and decided to live his next year and a half as her slave.

All his fault.

She placed her new war-mask over her face, a mask that left the upper half of her face exposed, and methodically slid on her leather gloves. Much had changed from the armor once worn by the faithful of Naga Sadow. With materials like durasteels and rarer metals no longer available, armor for subsequent generations of Tribe slowly changed as local customs and styles were adapted. Much of the improvements and crafting came from the militarized

continent of Alanciari. The master armor-smiths and metal-workers from the larger continent had perfected armor making during the millennia of cold war before the Tribe absorbed them, and now worked hand-in-hand with Tribe armor-smiths to create Force-infused robes and plating for the soldiers of the Tribe.

With Ship and subsequent raids, durasteel and other technologies had once again become available, and the armor had changed once more. On her initial mission out with Ship, she had worn the standard Tribe battle-attire—black robes covering red armor-plating, with a full facemask and Keshiri steelsilk-spun pants. With the influx of technology, it was decided that the Tribe's fighters would now have only the best.

Pulling up her silver-lined hood, Vestara studied her reflection. A chrome-gilded durasteel mantel sat on her shoulders, complete with neck-guard. Attached by a single chain to the mantel was a flowing black, blaster-proof cape. Rather than robes, she now sported a gleaming black three-piece armor set that had been fitted custom-made for her and adhered to her body in such a way to maximize her movement without sacrificing protection. The upper breast-plate was made of blaster-proof material, rated to withstand shots from the modern-day blasters. The lighter armor plate beneath was made up of flexsteel and cortosis and was designed to ablate lightsaber strikes. Her lower torso was protected by a heavier version of the flexsteel and cortosis weave beneath slender durasteel plating. The half-mask she wore doubled as a filtration and rebreather system should smoke or poisonous gas be utilized. In all, she was the picture of lethal beauty.

She stared down her reflection with baleful yellow eyes. The design was said to be influenced by the armors of Sith Lords of old, meant to symbolize the Tribe's connection to the past and announce their legitimacy as heirs to that legacy. Though others would be dressed in similar attire, it was her family's connections that enabled her to wear armor made from off-world materials. The last to slide into place was her glass parang in one side of her heavy utility belt and her lightsaber on her other.

"Daughter, we must be leaving now!" Gavar called up the stairs.

Vestara gave her reflection one last stare-down, nodded, and pulled her hood over her light brown hair. She emerged from her room and made her way to the grand staircase. Awaiting her at the bottom were her parents. Her father, Circle Lord Gavar Khai wore a garb similar to her own, but with gold trim instead of silver. His

half-mask was also a deep red in the style of the Keshiri military. Her mother, Lahka Khai, was not Force-sensitive and was thus not permitted to wear such clothing. But she was a member of the Tribe and served as a captain in the secret police force used to root out threats to the Circle. Her armor, hailing from designs used by Naga Sadow for *his* infantry, closely resembled the rank-and-file of the tribe's forces, the main difference being its color. Where the rank-and-file troopers wore gleaming full-body suits of silver, copper, or red depending on their station, her armor was matte black.

Vestara had read in the histories Ship provided that a Sith Lord by the name of Revan had later co-opted the design for his own forces with a few modifications of his own. Rather than a narrow black visor used on the helmets of the infantry of the Tribe, he had changed it to a full face mask. The helmets of the Tribe also contained two 'eyes' of Naga Sadow directly above the visor slat in gleaming metal. But for all intents and purposes, the armor design of the two eras had scarcely changed.

"Saber Khai," Gavar acknowledged with a note of pride in his voice.

"Lord Khai," Vestara tilted her own head back.

"Shall we go?" Gavar said rhetorically.

The trio exited their home and headed towards their awaiting speeder. Only to pause when they saw several security vehicles racing down the road towards their estate.

"Lahka?" Gavar voiced with a touch of impatience.

"I'm sorry, my Lord. I do not know what this is about."

The lead speeder swung around to block the Khai family vehicle, and a squad of black-armored troopers emerged. A second speeder, stopping behind the Khai family vehicle, unloaded another squad of black-armored soldiers. A third stopped behind the second, and a quartet of red-armored soldiers emerged, followed by several Sith Sabers.

"What is the meaning of this?" Gavar barked.

"Lord Khai, pardon the interruption, but we must make sure your grounds are secure before you leave," one of the Sabers said apologetically. He briefly looked to the soldiers. "Search the speeder, the house. Leave no room unchecked."

"I demand an explanation, or I will have your head!"

"Sir, we are under orders from the Grand Lord himself. A dangerous fugitive has escaped and he was worried for the safety of your family. It would be an embarrassment to him should a Circle Lord be assassinated on the eve of our ascendancy."

"Fugi..." Gavar began

"You've lost the Jedi," Lahka noted, unintentionally interrupting her husband.

It was only because of her link to her mother that Vestara was able to pick up extreme amusement from the otherwise stony captain of Internal Security. Gavar must have likewise felt it, because he raised an eyebrow at the younger Force-user.

"Is this true?"

"I only know what the Grand Lord has ordered me to do," the Saber said, shaking his head almost pleadingly.

"How did..." Vestara trailed off as she noted two of the red-armored guards still guarding the speeders. One was a mammoth of a man, and the other a more slender woman barely taller than Vestara. For once Vestara was glad for her jaw-covering mask, as she was sure her jaw would have dropped open then and there.

"Daughter?" Gavar turned to her, then glanced at the two guards. "Is there something wrong?"

"No...father..." Vestara managed through very dry lips. Just how crazy were these Jedi? As that thought crossed her mind, she'd swear that she could feel the Jedi give her a mental wink in turn. "Nothing wrong at all."

"Why would the Jedi return here, it would be the first place we'd look," Gavar scowled back at the unfortunate Sith Saber following orders.

"Again, I only know what I was told," the Saber said helplessly.

"You have checked our speeder," Lahka gestured. "May we have your permission to head to the ceremonies?"

"Of course," the Saber said, looking relieved at the out she had

given him.

Vestara saw the larger of the two guards she had signaled out make a subtle gesture with his hand.

The Saber in turn spun to him and the smaller female guard. "You two, go with them and ensure their safety."

"Yes, Saber Dov," they saluted smartly, hands over their hearts.

"Is that hardly necessa..."

"Lord Khai," Vestara said carefully. "If the Grand Lord has people with us from here to the ceremonies, no one can accuse us of conspiring to recover the exceedingly stupid Jedi I had as my manservant."

"You are wise beyond your years, Saber Khai," the larger guard voiced.

Vestara wished she had the shock-collar control at that moment. "I did not ask for your opinion, worm. You are to accompany my family, but it does not mean I'll tolerate you."

"Saber Dov," the male voiced. "Since Saber Khai is rumored to have romantic relations with her slave, shall we have her ride in our speeder instead? We don't want to endanger a Circle Lord should the dastardly Jedi make an attempt to reunite himself with his paramour."

Vestara's eyes narrowed as the other Saber nodded as if it were the best idea in the world. "An excellent suggestion trooper...what was your name again?"

"Esti, sir. Narod Esti."

"I shall put in a commendation for your insightfulness. Saber Khai, if it will not be too much of an inconvenience, will you ride in their speeder as they follow your parents?"

Vestara gritted her teeth behind her mask, glaring daggers through the narrow slit of a visor in Doran's helmet. "No inconvenience at all. It's for the Tribe after all."

"Saber Khai," the female trooper gestured towards the speeder they had come in. "If you will."

"I'll see you at the ceremony, Lord Khai, mother," Vestara acknowledged, moving to the speeder door. "I am sure the Tribe's best and brightest will be able to keep me safe from an idiot-brained Jedi. After all, if he freed himself, he couldn't possibly be as stupid as to return here or try to intercept us en route to the largest gathering of the Tribe on record."

"Told you," Vestara heard the female trooper mutter to her counterpart, her helmet speaker disabled so that the sound didn't travel far.

"Keep my daughter safe, Trooper Esti. Do not let that Jedi come within a single meter of my daughter," Gavar Khai growled. "Or you will suffer a fate far worse than death."

"Yes, Lord Khai," Doran saluted smartly, then slid into the enclosed speeder.

Once all doors within the speeder were closed and they were making their way down the driveway, Vestara could no longer maintain her composure.

"Are you brain dead!? What sort of idiot impulse possessed you to come back if you were free?"

"Wow, that sounded really familiar," Doran said deadpan. "I think I've heard those very words before."

The red-armored trooper in the co-pilot's seat thunked him not-so-gently on his shoulder. Before shaking her hand out. "Ouch, stupid Durasteel-for-Muscle. You know, if it weren't for us being in a position to bail you out, your harebrained schemes would have gotten you killed several times over."

"I definitely factor you into my plans," Doran said in defense.

Vestara glanced to the other woman. "You are his apprentice?"

"Kyrelle Frieneil, at your service," the other woman shifted in her seat to look back at Vestara with her helmeted head. "Been with this *Di'kutla* of a Jedi for about twelve years now."

"Lovers?" Vestara asked, sensing the very strong bond between the two.

"What? No! Ewww!" Kyrelle recoiled.

"Thanks," Doran replied dryly.

"No offense to you, master, but you're like my big brother. Being with you that way...a whole bunch of wrong. I'm sure you understand Saber Khai."

"Some of the families on Kesh practice inbreeding, they only had so many people onboard the *Omen* when it crashed after all. I don't think that's a turn off for them," Doran supplied.

Kyrelle whacked him again on the shoulder with her other hand, and again shook it off. "Okay, those added armor platings so don't make it fair."

"You just hate it when I'm right."

Vestara stared blankly at the two of them, unsure if she was dreaming, hallucinating, or was having a bad case of nerves as she prepared to leave Kesh for what was probably going to be the last time in a very long while. "You followed him to Kesh?"

"Took a shuttle from the Mando ship and mag-clamped it to the back of the bridge-tower before you guys jumped to hyperspace," Kyrelle confirmed. "Wasn't about to let my dunderheaded master get in over his head without me. Promised Sannah I would never leave his side unless he found someone to replace me. Once on Kesh, I just blended in, acted arrogantly superior and visited the sights. I could see why my master was head-over-heels for visiting a place like this. It's like you guys were stuck in a time capsule. Things he and I saw only in ancient holocrons and wall-etchings are like present day for you people. Straight down to these armor sets. I mean, if we can get back to the galaxy before you Sithies make it go nova, we can sell these sets as 'antiques' and make a fortune."

"You...did not wish to warn the rest of the galaxy about the Tribe?"

"It can take care of itself," Kyrelle waved a hand. "It has the likes of the Solos and Skywalkers defending it from itself."

"Skywalker," Vestara repeated, a memory returning to her.

"She has a crush on Ben," Doran supplied.

This time Vestara used the hilt of her parang and bonked him on the back of his head.

"Hey! Driving here!" Doran protested, rubbing his head.

"He has a girlfriend, you know," Kyrelle added.

"The blond, I saw," Vestara shrugged. "And I do *not* have a crush on him."

"Uh huh," Kyrelle whirled back around in her seat and began humming something that probably had more of a meaning wherever in the galaxy she was from. Whatever it was definitely sounded teasing though.

"Spirit Girl, can it. Sithy passenger gets extra-Sithy when provoked."

"Don't poke the wild Sith, got it."

Vestara tried to calm herself, knowing she would be in all sorts of trouble should it ever be discovered that the people driving her were two Jedi. In fact, all her instincts, training, and common-sense told her that she should dispatch the both of them now. Use their deaths as a way to one-up the Grand Lord. A sort of hey, *I killed two Jedi, how many have **you** killed?* She chuckled to herself. Like *that* would go over well.

"What do you two have planned?"

"Don't worry about that either," Doran shook his head. "Just wanted to let you know that I was okay, and good luck with the whole war and galactic-domination thing. I'll be rooting for you."

"You want the Tribe to succeed?" Vestara said incredulously.

"*Rooting for you,*" Doran clarified, using Keshiri Basic to ensure there was no misunderstanding. "*You're a good person, Vestara. Probably the first Sith I've met to be able to use the dark side for good. Most of the Sith and dark Jedi I've met are like Vran or the Grand Lord, unable to find a Hutt's backside even if they were shoved up into it.*"

"That is gross," Kyrelle groaned.

"*Stick to your dreams, Vestara,*" Doran continued with a gentle seriousness. "*If the Sith Empire of your imagination ever comes to be, the galaxy will be much more stable for it. Especially if it can live in peace beside the Jedi Order.*"

"The Jedi would never let us be," Vestara shook her head. "In every

moment of history, they have made it their mission to kill the Sith. There will never be peace between Sith and Jedi."

"You haven't killed me, I'm a Jedi," Doran pointed out. "Start small, never think anything is impossible until you've actually tried it a ton of times with an army of friends and likeminded people."

"That's your advice?" Vestara laughed softly.

"Hey, we Jedi Masters aren't all wise and all knowing."

"We're here," Kyrelle warned.

Doran removed his helmet and looked back to her with a wink and boyish grin. "Saber Khai, we've reached your destination. Go out there, wow them all, and then go and change the galaxy."

DL-V-DL

The amphitheater was in a valley in the Takara Mountains, the looming structure of the Sith Temple at the mountains' summit visible in the light of the setting sun and the many torchlights that surrounded it. The amphitheater was of new construction, having been made upon the success of Vestara's first mission, when it became clear that the Tribe would finally be leaving Kesh. It was a vast structure, capable of seating millions. Indeed it looked as if all of Kestah had come to the ceremonies. The stands were packed with spectators and onlookers, the distinct purple skin of the Keshiri people and their blue-hued garments standing out amidst the dark-gray rock of the amphitheater.

Vast stone braziers lined the top of the amphitheater, with more modern lightposts ringing the bottom. The atmosphere was full of excitement and trepidation as the young, old, and non-combatants of the Tribe and Kesh awaited to see their family members and loved ones off on the monumental undertaking.

And then the ceremonies began. Deep, powerful drums pounded twice in quick succession, the vibrations loud and echoing off the surrounding mountains. The crowd quickly fell silent. The drums beat once more, two bold strokes that made those present feel the sound in their very bodies.

A lone horn, long and mournful blared out. And then the drumming began in earnest. Slow at first, but gradually picking up speed. The horn sounded again, and a more wooden thumping joined in the

beating thunder of the drums.

Murmurs filled the crowd as a line of hooded figures began to emerge out of the mountain facing the amphitheater. With them almost on the horizon, the vid-screens projected them in more detail, the robes showing them to be members of the priestly caste of the Tribe. Their role as keepers of lore, users of Sith Alchemy, and guardians of the Sith Temple was well known to the audience. But they had never been seen out of the Sith Temple itself. Their presence at the foot of the mountain surprised many. They began to chant to the timing of the pounding drums and wooden poles, their words said in the Tribe's Old Tongue—the ancient Sith language.

Wai Nwûl!

Shâsot!

Tyûk! Midwan! Asha!

Won

Qyâsik

Nun!

It was the ancient code the Tribe had lived by, had ordered their society after and had sustained them for five thousand years.

The Code of the Sith.

The horn blared once more, the drummers continuing their rumbling beat. A Keshiri honor-guard on winged Uvak took flight from the mountain perches. With precision flying, they performed daring feats of acrobatics that had the crowds ooh and ahh. A troupe of dancers in fiery-red outfits, thousands strong, rose up center-stage and performed a choreographed routine that had been practiced to perfection. They swirled and whirled, their flowing sleeves flapping about and turning them into miniature cyclones of flame with every movement.

Sith'ari

Wai Qorit

Kûshoksh Ashaanjat

Dâjit

Midwanosh

Sith'ari

The Gods

Eternal

Shall dream of victory

Witness

The power

Of the Gods

Another set of thunderous drums picked up the beat to join in the first, the ground shaking from the vibration. The dancers twirled off to the sides of the stage as it sunk into the ground. When it ascended once more, the bright lights and flickering flame glinted off the polished silver armor of a full battalion of Sith ground troopers. The crowd went wild upon seeing them, cheers and whistles filling the air. The ground behind the platform shook, parting much to the amazement of the crowd, and a lift thrice as large rose up to bring even more silver-armored troopers to bear. In unison, the troops snapped to attention and took several large steps towards the mountain range. The lifts retracted, and then rose once more. These groups took further steps outwards as the ground shifted to reveal dozens more lifts of similar size. All rose, bringing the soldiers of the Tribe into the light of the evening sun. All throughout, the drums pounded, the dancers danced on the sidelines, streamers fluttered, and the Uvak riders swooped through the air.

The process repeated, until the field between the mountains and the amphitheater was filled with silver-armored soldiers in gleaming armor. A vast array tens of millions strong that presented the bulk of the military might of the Tribe. Then the lifts rose once more, revealing simultaneously tens of thousands of copper-armored soldiers, the specialists and technicians of the Tribe. The next to appear were the red-armored troopers, the elites and special operators. Emerging last were the generals and higher ranking officers in opulent gold armor, each wielding long-arms strapped to their backs. By then the crowd was going absolutely crazy, cheering

at the tops of their lungs.

A roar filled the air, the almost alien sound of starship engines responding to the pounding drums, and everyone fell silent. Dozens of frigates and transports that lowered themselves into the atmosphere like streaking meteors. There were vessels captured from the Aduba Starhoppers, from the Corporate Sector, from the Hutts, from the Tion Hegemony, and even local ships constructed using the aesthetics of the ships that had once served Naga Sadow. The lone horn sounded, and the drums picked up once more. The frigates landed in the field between the mountains and the amphitheater, and the troops marched on to their assignments with unquestioning discipline. The frigates performed an intricate ballet as they leapfrogged each other upon filling up their assigned contingent.

The chanting priests repeated the Sith Code, and the cheering promptly resumed as the black-robed Force-users of the Tribe appeared on the main stage. As with the ground-forces, the Tyros emerged first. All armored, with lightsaber and parang at their sides, they marched without pause from the lifts towards their awaiting frigates. The Sabers were next to emerge, the perimeter armed with the ancient Sith lanvarok or lightspear in addition to their usual lightsabers. Some headed off to follow the Tyros, while others stepped to the side.

A drum-roll picked up as the lift lowered for one final time. When it emerged, the horn bellowed one last time as the Circle of Lords appeared in concentric circles, with Grand Lord Darish Vol standing in the center in glittering robes of gold. The drumming stopped, the last echoes of the horn's call echoing off the mountains. The crowd shifted in nervous anticipation. What was the leader of the Tribe about to do? What was the Skygod leader about to do to demonstrate his power?

They received their silent questions a moment later.

With a dramatic thrust of his hand, Darish Vul aimed it at the Sith Temple standing tall at the highest mountain point. The Force blazed around him, throwing up a storm of dust and gravel. And then a tremendous cracking sound resounded from the tops of the mountains.

The crowd gasped in unison. The temple began to crumble as if giant hands were crushing it inwards. Large boulders bounded down the side of the mountain as part of a series of cascading

landslides. An audible snap rang out, and the temple collapsed completely. As it did, what looked like the entire mountain side began to give way. The noise was terrible and frightening, and yet the sight was completely awe-inspiring.

From the massive plume of dust, the prow of the Sith dreadnaught *Omen* rose into the air for the first time in five millennia. Its metal plating catching the last rays of the sun, where it glinted menacingly. The fleet of frigates all swarmed around the rising behemoth in parade formation, the captured cruisers *Dark Blade* and *Eternal Crusader* likewise coming down from low orbit to make their presence felt. Innumerable squadrons of blade-shaped starfighters, their design the same as the fighters of five millennia ago, soared through the air. Their engines bright and blue against the darkening sky as they took up their positions around the fleet. And as the last of the dust cloud settled, everyone stared up in amazed disbelief as the might of the Tribe hovered before them.

And then the platform with the Circle of Lords vibrated and began to rise even further, repulsor technology acquired from the off-world enabling a feat none on Keshiri had seen before. The crowd was in complete silence, thoughts of the members of the Tribe truly being gods going through their minds. The platform continued upwards, carrying its load towards the *Omen* in the far distance.

The chanting picked up once more, the drums and percussion sticks adding their primal beats. The message they were broadcasting was clear

We are Sith'ari

And we have returned to the stars at last!

DL-Chapter End-DL

A\N: Thought I'd get started posting this before my hiatus. This is the start of a five-ish chapter story focusing on Vestara's campaign that leads right up into the start of Legacy of the Jedi. Hope you enjoyed it, I'm not sure when I'll be able to post the next chapter though. For those curious, Doran won't show up again in this story, but will pop up in Legacy Side B later on down the line.

2. Chapter 2

Chapter Two

DL-I-DL

The government of Centrality controlled close to two-dozen systems on the far reaches of the Outer Rim and had remained relatively separate from the rest of the galaxy. Its worlds accessible by one stable hyperspace lane—the Cadma conduit—it was a self-sufficient cluster with its own military and court systems. So far away from the Core, it had signed a 'treaty of friendship' with the Galactic Alliance purely for formality sake. In truth, the Centrans distrusted the greater governing bodies and were perfectly happy in their corner of the galaxy. The Yuuzhan Vong and Killik Wars had passed them by completely, the Galactic Civil War before those had scarcely affected them. The Empire had left them alone, even stationed older vessels to safeguard the trade on the hyperspace lanes within. Though they weren't without their share of political intrigue and criminal elements, their issues would have paled in comparison to the challenges faced by the rest of the galaxy.

Unfortunately for the Centrans, their isolationist policies made them a prime target for an up and coming military force looking to begin a slow expansion out from their home system. With next to no diplomatic channels to the outside galaxy, Centrality had fallen before anyone realized that they were in trouble. Though Centrality had a military force, said force had never truly been tested in combat. Nor had their ships been kept up to date, with a bulk of their capital ships being *Acclamator*-class assault ships and *Victory I*-class Star Destroyers.

"*Master Annax, begin landing your troops.*" Grand Lord Vol's holo directed.

"Yes, Grand Lord," the ground commander Tola Annax clasped a hand to her chest and bowed her head in acknowledgment. "For the Tribe."

Onboard the ChaseMaster frigate *Starstalker*, Vestara heard the order and let her hands rest on the hilts of her weapons. Across from her, fellow Saber Vran, and his sister Kaara stood waiting, little emotion escaping the powerful duo. There was close to a dozen Force-using members of the Tribe onboard, thrice that in ground-troopers. Lacking actual troop landing craft—one of the

many things the Tribe hoped to correct by capturing Centrality—the Tribe was forced to use their frigates as troop-carriers.

And the Tribe definitely had troop carriers to spare. Centrality's capital world Erilnar had a bare-minimum in defense. The two *Accalamtors* and their support ships, though sufficient to discourage pirates, had been wholly overwhelmed by the emergence of the Tribe's battle fleet. The *Omen* had the honors of first blood, with its upgraded turbolaser batteries and ion cannons turning both assault ships into floating wrecks within minutes of the engagement beginning. Ground-based fighter squadrons and those coming from the carrier ships were smoked by the Force-sensitive fighter pilots backed by Battle Meditation. Bred and trained for war since birth, the members of the Tribe were ready to prove their mettle. As a result, the system had fallen under Tribe control in a horribly short amount of time.

But ground forces were still needed to secure the planet. The Tribe wanted an empire, not smoldering worlds. Despite having their fleet decimated, the Centrans refused to yield, their own ground-based forces mustering to protect their capitol. Turbolaser turrets, walkers, tanks, even atmospheric fighter craft were ready to repel the Tribe's assault.

The holo-readout in the hold showed Vestara and the others their destination. Since most of the planet was covered in lakes, and the cities protected by powerful shield generators, there were very few places they could actually land. Their target was a black sandy beach with forest of ghostly black trees growing along the shore line. Mobile gun-emplacements had been rolled up as the Centrans detected the Tribe's approach, and more Centran troopers were rushing towards the frontlines.

"Leading nerfs to the slaughter," Kaara shook her head in disapproval.

"Us or them?" One of Kaara's Tyros voiced. "That's a lot of guns."

Vestara saw the other woman roll her eyes, and answered before Kaara could say something biting. "Them of course, Tyro. We are the might of the Tribe, remember your training and you'll see this day to through."

"Saber Khai," Sith Master Annax spoke, moving through the awaiting Sith. "Take your Tyros, you have point."

"I obey, Master Annax," Vestara clasped a fist to her chest in acknowledgment. The three Tyros assigned to her mimicked her gesture, excitement and fear mingling in a dizzying mix of emotion. They were all around her age, with the oldest, being a dark-haired human male, Vitarn. Second oldest was a tall Keshiri female with light purple skin, Airia. And the youngest of the three, at fifteen years of age, was the blonde-haired human Jesdan. Far from being the strongest, the Grand Lord's plans to get Vestara killed had played out once more and she had been assigned the youngest and weakest of the Tyros.

"The rest of you, remember the target. We disable or destroy the shield generator and this battle is ours."

They heard the pings and faint blasts as anti-aircraft fire erupted from the Centran lines. With the emplacements behind the shields, no orbital bombardment or fighter run would have been able to take them out. The Tribe's forces endured the violent barrage. A flare in the Force and sudden absence revealed that one of the frigates had succumbed to the storm of laserfire.

"Landing in ten!" The pilot called back.

Another flare and absence as a second frigate was blown away. Its pieces ricocheted off the *Starstalker* and the shockwave shook the ship.

"Five! Four! Three!"

Vestara exhaled and freed her weapons, stepping towards the landing ramp. Through the meld, she could sense her Tyros' agitation, and it grated on her nerves. She sent a menacing glare through the Force, and the Tyros went from fearing the engagement to fearing her. That was somewhat better.

"Two! One!"

The frigate vibrated as it touched down at the very edge of the beach. Its ramp lowered, and the Tribe's fighters let out a yell as they poured out into a thick white morning fog. The sound was deafening as the riotous roar of blasterfire and heavier cannons from the Centran lines opened up, the air full of deadly buzzing as streaks of red blasterbolts blazed in a thick sheet towards the invaders.

Vestara's saber flashed incessantly, her red blade swirling in front of

her as she batted aside the wall of blasterfire directed towards their transport. She heard her Tyros follow her across the dark sand, squeezing in tight to combine their saber defenses. A whistling sound filled the air, and though her Tyros were too busy trying to deflect blasterfire, Vestara heard it and looked up. An artillery shell was slicing through the air directly towards their clustered forms. She could, of course, press her attack, abandon her Tyros to their fate. But then the Jedi's advice echoed in her mind and she clenched her jaw. With an almost sub-vocal growl, Vestara stepped behind her Tyro and held up her hands towards the projectile. Her Tyros shielded her as she then redirected the shell back towards the sandy bluffs obscured by the thick fog. It was a momentary victory, however, the sheer amount of lasers slowing the advance down into a crawl.

Tribe troopers returned fire whenever they could, their shining armor a sharp contrast to the dark sand beneath them. With the thick fog, however, they were at a disadvantage. The defenders no doubt had thermal imaging and other sensor systems guiding their increasingly accurate fire. A nearby frigate, still in the process of off-loading its troopers was hit by anti-vehicle rockets, and its explosion sent bodies and shrapnel flying in all directions. Another had its hatch stitched with heavy laser fire the moment it landed, the red lightsabers of the Tribe standing out amid the thick fog and providing a perfect target. The troops inside were caught off guard and mowed down instantly. Then the Centrans brought even more heavy artillery to bear, and munitions began to rain down all across the beach in a random pattern. Lines of explosions throwing up black sand and the unfortunate Tribe soldier caught in the blast.

But the Tribe continued to advance, the Force aiding them through the low visibility. A wall of red sabers pulsated brightly as the Sabers and Tyros began to ward the Tribe's soldiers from the worst of the enemy fire. Missiles and rockets sent at them were sent flying back towards the points of origin. Blasterbolts were reflected with increasing accuracy, picking off the gunners hunkered down along the top of the beach. The Tribe's lines fast began to resemble the jagged profile of the Takara mountains—its peaks being led by skilled Sabers, its valleys defended by the Tyros. Bodies continued to fall, but the momentum gradually began to shift.

When the Tribe's frontlines reached the first line of Centran defenses, a different sort of emotion suddenly filled the air. Where before there was grim determination and desire to defend their homes against an unknown threat, sheer and utter terror began to spread.

With good reason.

As Sabers like Vran and Kaara reached the first wave of defenders, they were far from subtle with their method of elimination. All at once, the Centran defenders were seeing their comrades tossed through the air like rag-dolls, or crushed by invisible hands, or flash-fried with lightning. A whole gun-emplacement was lifted off the ground and dropped onto a group of gunners trying to fend off the Tribe's advance. Several Sabers began to show-off, with storms of Sith Lightning suddenly being called down upon wide swaths of land, or mind-domination being used to turn squads of soldiers against their allies. The chaos and horror stretched out in a rippling wave, the Centran defensive lines quickly giving way in the face of the brutality.

Vestara continued her own advance, her saber activating only when necessary. Having seen that the glowing weapon only attracted enemy fire, she had resorted to using her parang, and had instructed her Tyros to do the same. They were silent death as they flitted through the spindly trees, rising up behind unsuspecting soldiers and slitting their throats without a sound. A noise and Vestara saw another group of soldiers sprinting towards them. She hurled her curved, glass blade through the air, guiding it with the Force and watching with grim satisfaction as it decapitated the group with deadly efficiency. The blade flew back into her hand, and she paused to search for another target.

The sound of heavy weapons' fire drew her attention. On a bluff overlooking the beach was a bunker-like construct spewing out an unending wave of superheated metal and blasterbolts. A rocket whistled out from the bunker and intercepted a frigate as it was trying to take off, blowing out an engine and sending the starship spinning into the lake. Vestara made a gesture to her Tyros, and they nodded, sheathing their weapons and scaling the rocky bluff. The occupants inside the bunker were unaware that they were being flanked and continued to lay devastation down on the Tribe forces below them. Once on the bluff, Vestara noted a group of Centran soldiers lying prone on the sides of the bunker, taking shots at the Tribe's forces and augmenting the bunker's firepower.

Working with coordination honed on Keshiri, Vestara motioned towards three of the Centran soldiers, and they were yanked off the ground. Their startled yells lasted for only a second as they were whipped through the air and impaled on three crimson sabers that flashed on and off. The bodies fell to the ground, and three more Centran soldiers were airborne as they turned to face the new

threat. Three more soldiers were skewered. The last three had managed to bring their weapons to bear, but Vestara yanked their weapons from their grip and her parang swirled through the air and removed their heads.

The entire encounter lasted less than ten seconds.

"Don'sil, report! Your guns have gone silent!" the radio from one of the dead soldiers squawked.

Vestara picked up the device, quickly understood how it worked, and pressed the button to speak. "Your men are dead. Leave the bunker. I will not be merciful if you force me to go in after you."

The man on the other end did not respond. Vestara closed her eyes in concentration, seeking out the life that had spoken over the radio. She searched the bunker, mentally homing in on a cluster of life further in. She found the man, slipped into his mind, heard him relay a report to his superiors. The man in charge of the bunker rejected the idea of surrender. Vestara manipulated the radio-operator's mind, used him to grab a blaster from one of the others in the room and promptly blast the man in charge. She withdrew and activated the radio again.

"This is the one responsible for your commander's death. Last chance, surrender and live. Hide like mole rats and be exterminated like vermin."

Silence at first. *"Wait! Wait! We're coming out! Don't roast our brains! We surrender!"*

"They can't seriously believe we'll let them live," Vitam. "Cowards like that shouldn't deserve to live."

"True warriors fight until the end," Airia agreed.

"Why go in after them if they'll present themselves without the trouble?" Vestara said simply.

The bunkers' guns went silent, and several minutes later, the door opened. Over a dozen more Centran soldiers came out with their hands above their heads.

"Tyros," Vestara inclined her head briefly.

The Tyros unsheathed their parangs and advanced without mercy.

Even as the last body fell, the ground trembled as something heavy impacted it. The group of four Tribe members turned around to see something hulking pierce through the white fog. A thick, metal appendage crunched through the twisted black trees, and then another, a box like head illuminated with running lights coming into sight. A head bristling with laser cannons.

The walker's profile was joined by two more, the sound of hover-tanks and airspeeders whistling through the sparse woods—the Centran reinforcements arriving in force.

Vestara glanced about the battlefield, and from her vantage point was able to see these new reinforcements grind the Tribe's advance to a halt. Her group had been unnoticed so far by the Centrans, but she knew that wouldn't last long. Her maneuver to takeout the bunker had her and her Tyros trapped between two lines of Centran forces. There was only one thing they could do

"Ignore them! Press the attack!" Vestara barked, even as massive laser bolts blazed out from the walkers and blasted apart several of the Tribe on the beach. The walkers targeted another departing frigate, its powerful lasers blasting the starship from the air. "We have to get to the shield generator!"

The Tyros followed her Force-assisted sprint through the trees. From seemingly out of nowhere a hover-tank burst forth from the fog, yet the Force had given the quartet an advanced warning. Two of the Tyros had darted to the side, running along opposite lengths of the tank with sabers active. Vestara and the third Tyro leaped up and sprinted over the top, their own sabers flashing. When all four had bypassed the tank, it exploded in a dramatic fireball, its shatterpoints firmly shattered.

They weren't the only ones to have advanced past the beach. Similar acts of destruction echoed in the dense fog, bright flashes of flame evidence of more Centran war-machines falling prey to Force-using dark siders. Even then, the walkers continued to play havoc on the Tribe's advance, limiting any further support.

"You're still alive," Kaara noted, joining Vestara's group having seen the flash of their lightsabers.

"Your Tyros aren't," Vestara noted.

"They died for the Tribe," Kaara said apathetically.

A whistling sound filled the air, and both Sabers redirected the incoming shell with a push of their hands. The shell spun out of control until the fuse ran out and it leveled a patch of black-barked trees.

"Shield generator should be just ahead," Vran's large form appeared from the mist. "Glory to the one who destroys it."

"Glory is yours," Vestara gestured, knowing full well how the brother and sister thought. They had both noted that her Tyros were alive, and were no doubt planning to use that fact against her. If she let them go on ahead, they wouldn't have to continue their line of Sith-like plotting. "The Tyros and I will cover you."

"For the Tribe," Vran tilted his head, as if showing he knew that she knew what he had been thinking.

"For the Tribe," Vestatara agreed.

Both Vran and Kaara picked up their pace, darting out ahead of the other four.

"Saber Khai!" Vitam protested.

"The shield generator will be heavily defended," Vestara said coolly. "Trip-mines, automated defenses, set emplacements. We will let the two of them soften it up for us."

They could hear the sounds of the two Tribe Sith battering their way through whatever Centran forces lay ahead. Flares of flame spewed out from whatever the two were making explode. Shrapnel zipping through the air along with pressurized waves of Force energy. It was very doubtful that anything would actually stop them.

Then, the fog began to lift. In the distance, they could see the shield generators sitting on a floating platform in the middle of a much larger lake. There was a laser-fence surrounding its perimeter, with guard towers ever few dozen meters.

And a massive hole in the perimeter where Kaara and Vran had brute-forced their way through. And the decimated remains of the few defenders and personal walkers on station. Two of the guard towers had been ripped from the ground and slammed into two others, leaving two x-shaped piles of debris crackling against the remains of another part of the fence.

"I don't think they'll leave anything for us," the lone female Tyro in the group remarked sarcastically, stepping through the shredded fence.

"They will," Vestara pointed.

Kaara and Vran had commandeered two jet-ski-like craft and were racing towards the shield-generator. The Centrants, however, had the most ingenious defense. A massive wave-machine continued to send twenty-foot waves rolling across the lake's surface, keeping the two dark Jedi from getting any closer. If they tried to go over the top of a crest, the laser defenses on the generator platform opened fire. If the fate of the planet didn't hinge on the fate of the shield generator, it would have been almost comical.

"Your plan, Saber Khai?" Vitam asked, new respect in his voice.

"We have the Force," Vestara smirked behind her mask. She looked over her shoulder back towards the beach. The hulking form of the four-legged walkers just visible in the dissipating fog. "And the Force has provided us with a solution."

Several minutes later, confused alarm erupted over the Centran comm-frequencies. An AT-AT walker was suddenly lifted off the ground and floated through the air as if caught on a breeze. The order was out to find the dark Jedi focusing on the walker and blast them, but the Centrants were all looking in the wrong direction. If one paid attention to the perimeter fencing of the shield generator, they would see three Tribe Tyros seated on the backs of their legs in tremendous concentration. Vestara stood behind them, waiting for the Tyros to bring their target closer. In the back of her mind she sent a pitying look to Vran and Kaara who were still trying to mount their direct assault on the shield generator's platform.

The walker's four legs flailed futilely in the air as it was brought through the gaping hole of the perimeter fence, the Tyros choosing that moment to spin it in a circle to keep those onboard disoriented.

Vestara closed her eyes once more and reached out into the cockpit of the walker. She could sense the panic, the bewilderment and confusion, a sense of despair. She entered the mind of the gunner, silently communicating her wishes to the Tyros. The walker was lifted even higher into the air, above the crest of the waves on the lake, its cockpit now facing the distant shield generator.

Full power to weapons, Vestara mouthed silently. The gunner hit the

appropriate switch. *Fire.*

Powerful laser bolts flashed out from the walker's main cannons. A split second later, the sky brightened as if a second sun had risen, the shockwave rolling across the water moments after. The wave caught Vran and Kaara and bowled them over, washing them in an undignified mess back to shore. A spray of water soaked the Tyros, breaking their concentration, and the walker plummeted from its height, landing on its neck and completely crushing the cockpit beneath its mass. When the shockwaves had subsided, the floating platform was no more.

The wave-machine, the laser defenses, the shield generator, they were all gone.

And with that the shield protecting the capital city vanished.

Just what the Tribe was waiting for. The remaining walkers found themselves the victims of Force-targeted laser strikes, turned into twisted hulks of burning metal in the blink of an eye. The lines of hover-tanks, artillery units, and fast-moving speeders were likewise annihilated by strafing runs from Tribe fightercraft.

Within minutes of the shield generator being neutralized, the fight for the capital city, and by extension, the planet, was over.

DL-II-DL

"And leading the bold assault on the shield generator, resulting in its destruction, are Sabers Vran and Kaara. Your contributions to the Tribe are to be commended, and your actions remembered."

For some reason, Vestara didn't have to force the grim smile on her face as she watched the two Sabers receive the accolades that were rightfully hers. Doran had been right, the spotlight wasn't what she needed at the moment. If inept Sabers like Vran and Kaara advanced and got themselves killed off, it'd leave a power vacuum for herself to step into. The Tyros who had followed her were less understanding of the politics involved and openly projected their disapproval of the slight.

"Smile," Vestara said through gritted teeth. "Be proud of our brother and sister in the Tribe. They did clear the way for us after all."

Vitam glowered. "We'd be one step closer to Saber if..."

"Do you really want to make enemies of Vran and Kaara?" Vestara asked. "They may be brutes, but they are deadly brutes. If they see you as a threat, they will be more trouble than worth the effort to fight."

"Saber Vestara Khai," the Circle Lord in charge of the campaign smiled down at her beneficently. "Do you agree that Sabers Vran and Kaara are deserving of such recognition and have earned a command of their own?"

"I do, High Lord Taalon," Vestara inclined her head. "If it weren't for their cunning and wit against a superior force, the tide of battle would have changed for ill. Their quick thinking washed away all enemy forces, drowning them all with their amazing strength... and intellect."

Satisfied, the High Lord nodded and went back to detailing Vran and Kaara's next assignment. In the meantime, both Sabers glared daggers at Vestara.

"I thought they weren't worth the effort?" Airia muttered under her breath.

"Ooops," Vestara said without emotion.

"And while the Tribe takes our battle to the system of Ringneldia, where we will capture the enemy's manufacturing capabilities, I call to the stage Saber Vestara Khai."

Vestara stepped forward, bowing her head in deference to the High Lord.

"The security of this planet is of the utmost importance. While the Tribe takes the battle to the stars, it will be the responsibility of yourself to ensure this planet's stability. Though the interim government has indeed pledged its full loyalty to us, there are still pockets of resistance in the far archipelagos that may prove problematic. Due to your initiative in taking the bunker at the beachhead, I am assigning you and your Tyros to this task."

"It will be an honor, for the Tribe," Vestara replied in rote. Even then, it took great effort to stem the bitterness of being left behind while the rest of the Tribe continued its war against Centrality. She had to remind herself to work slowly, that the Sith Empire she dreamed of wasn't going to be built in a day.

"Good, now..."

"High Lord Taalon," Vestara interrupted, an idea coming to her. "Might I ask a favor for my assignment?"

"Depends," Sarasu Taalon said, with a humoring smile on his face.

"I understand that there are many injured among the Tribe. Many of them Tyros and Sabers. Can I request that they be moved to the hospitals on this planet? This way we can preserve as many of the Tribe as we can for the future conflicts we will no doubt encounter."

"Just the Tyros and Sabers?"

"And the troopers as well," Vestara said, shaking her head. "We can also set up a temporary shipyard for some the frigates that require repairs."

High Lord Taalon regarded Vestara suspiciously. "And you would have command over these forces?"

"No, High Lord," Vestara shook her head. She glanced at Vran and Kaara. "But I am sure that these two Sabers of high esteem will be more than capable of supervising the interest of the Tribe."

"They are able fighters needed on the frontlines," the High Lord shook his head.

"We have hundreds of fighters wounded, some needing weeks before they return to battle. Are hundreds not more important than an able two?" Vestara asked innocently. Both Vran and Kaara were projecting murder her way, and she let them know she was smiling behind her face-mask just to tweak them even further.

"Saber Kaara," High Lord Taalon turned to the lean mass of muscle. "You are to remain here as the planet's regent, supervising the local government and ensuring they stay in line. Saber Khai will personally handle the last hold-outs of the old regime and you are to provide her with whatever support she requests. The Tribe is united in this matter and will show no discord. Am I clear?"

Kaara's face was stony as she tilted her head. "It will be done, High Lord."

"Saber Vran, you will accompany the rest of the Tribe to Ringneldia and serve as the strike-force leader."

"It will be done, High Lord," Vrana said in turn.

The High Lord motioned to Vestara, and Vestara took her place in front of her Tyros.

"Is this a case of us doing as you say and not as you do?" Jesdan said in amusement. "Saber Kaara looks as if she's thinking of increasingly new and painful ways to kill you."

"No, it would strain her mind too much," Vestara remarked. "And yes, do as I say. It's my first time instructing Tyros after all."

The Tyros all nodded in understanding, and Vestara winked back up at the glowering storm-cloud that was Kaara. The more of her attention she attracted, the less focused she'd be on her Tyros. Tyros who she'd easily chew up and spit out without even an afterthought. Vestara also had a very strong feeling that she wouldn't be getting any reinforcements for her assignment. If Kaara wanted her dead without getting her hands dirty, all she had to do was send her at the remnants without support. Or worse, send her at the remnants and then call in an orbital strike. There were so many possibilities, and most of them did not end well for her and the Tyros.

She held Kaara's murderous stare, her own eyes sparking confidently. She knew that in Kaara's mind, only one of them would be leaving the planet alive. But Vestara had other plans. With simultaneous tilts of their head, they accepted the silent challenge put down between the two.

The strongest survived, that was the way of the Tribe.

DL-III-DL

"The rebels are using these island chains as their base of operation," the new Erilnar defense minister said, pointing towards the holo-map. With Erilnar containing thousands of lakes and waterways, every land mass was surrounded by water. Even the capitol city was made up of seven inter-connecting land-masses. This made water transportation a high priority, with monorails or naval vessels needed to get to one place or another. "As you can see, they're very well sheltered from aerial attacks."

"These caves," Vestara gestured. "How far do they go?"

"A substantial distance, Lady Sith," the defense minister replied.

"The island chains were borne from a volcanic eruption thousands of years ago, and the caves connect to magma tubes which go underwater. The rebels can move easily from one island to the next without ever being spotted on the surface."

"Then we have to hit the tunnels simultaneously to cut off their escape," Kaara observed. "If we allow them to escape, then they will be all the more annoying to uproot."

"Do we have maps of those tubes?" Vestara looked to the defense minister.

"Yes," the man nodded. "We use similar tubes to move from island to island and record all possible routes in case of an underwater rockfall."

The defense minister hit a few buttons on the console, and detailed paths popped up on the holo-monitor.

"Over thirty routes to and from that chain," one of Erilnar's new generals grimaced. "After the losses we took repelling your invasion, we'll be hard pressed to provide a sizable enough force to secure all possible exits."

"Then we don't go in after them," Vestara said shortly. "Saber Kaara, has High Lord Taalon left you with any space-faring vessel with significant firepower?"

"The only ships I have are the damaged frigates being repaired on the lunar shipyard," Kaara showed no emotion as her yellow-eyed gaze settled calculatingly on Vestara. "The Grand Lord has likewise left the Meditation Sphere."

"What?" Vestara's head snapped from the holo-readout to her fellow Saber, unsure if she had heard correctly.

"Lady Rhea had the Meditation Sphere transferred to the shipyards shortly before the fleet jumped," Kaara continued in her usual monotone. "If it was not under the Grand Lord's orders, then she will be punished very shortly when her actions are uncovered."

"No matter what weapons you may have, the rebels are too sheltered by the underground caverns," another general protested. "Even an orbital bombardment wouldn't touch them."

"Do not underestimate the dark side," Kaara said coolly, her

attention on the general immediately cowed the man. "Your technology is insignificant to the power of the Force."

"Y..y...yes....sorry..."

"Using the main cannon on Ship should be adequate," Vestara voiced, sparing the general any further Sith attention, but only after the man needed to change his pants.

"Agreed," Kaara nodded once, understanding Vestara's plan. "Defense Minister, I want geological surveys of the surrounding areas. Fault lines, plate tectonics, anything of note."

"You'll have it first thing in the morning Lady Sith."

"Generals," Kaara looked to the gathered soldiers, most local, though two were of the Tribe. "I want your analysts to look at these tunnels and pick the most likely routes the rebels will run should they be flushed from their holes. Then station your men on those routes. Failure to end this rebellion in one decisive stroke will result in your immediate replacement. Clear?"

"Yes, ma'am!" They saluted sharply.

"Saber Khai," Kaara refocused on the other Saber in the room.

Vestara raised a single eyebrow, yellowed eyes meeting yellowed eyes. "Saber Kaara?"

"You are authorized to use the Meditation Sphere for this mission and this mission only. The moment the objective is complete, you are to return the Meditation Sphere to spacedock."

"You're in charge," Vestara tilted her head once, a slight smile tugging at the scarred side of her lips. Though it would have been all too easy to blast Kaara from space, it lacked the finesse and subtlety that was expected of the Tribe. On Kesh, those who openly killed your superior, rival, or ally were arrested and executed in turn. Guile and stealth were the keys in surviving the literal cutthroat politics of the Circle of Lords. You eliminated rivals by proxies, political maneuvering, intimidation, but never outright murder. By acknowledging Kaara's order, Vestara was letting her rival know that she still intended to 'play by the rules'.

"Should any escape, you will be responsible for hunting them down. We are using far too many resources on this minor problem as it is,"

Kaara tilted her head back in turn.

I'll play by the rules too.

Vestara motioned to the spacedock on the holo-display. "I'll need the full focus of my Tyros to generate a Force-beam strong enough for what we have in mind."

"Do it," Kaara allowed. "I will conscript some of the lesser-injured Tribe Tyros and Sabers to reinforce the ground forces. The lack of hand or leg should be of little consequence against foes such as the ones we are going against."

"Lady Sith," the defense minister said nervously. "Might I ask what you have in mind?"

"Just have your forces ready, defense minister," Kaara said apathetically. "When you see the full power of the Force employed against our enemies, you will be infinitely glad that you are of use to the Tribe."

DL-IV-DL

Enjoyed your freedom?

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you sounded upset, Ship," Vestara replied aloud.

"Saber Khai?" Tyro Vitam voiced his confusion.

"Talking to the Meditation Sphere," Vestara answered back. "I have a link to it which can come in handy at times."

I am not a tool to be put aside and picked up when needed.

"That is exactly what you are," Vestara said coldly, standing in front of the control dais. "You were created to *serve* the Sith. I am Sith, and you *will* serve me. Not the other way around."

Vestara suddenly felt a powerful pressure on her mind, as if someone had suddenly placed her brain in a trash-compactor and set it to 'rapid crush'. Immediately, Vestara turned the pain to her strength and generated the same electro-Force field that Doran had showed her. The sensation fell away in an instant. "I am not your puppet, Ship. You will serve me and bring glory to the Tribe, or cutting you off will be the least I will do."

Of course the last part was a bluff. She might have been capable of manipulating the serving droids and shielding herself from Ship, but she wasn't exactly sure if she could actually take on a sentient, Force-using vessel and win. She lowered her defenses to reestablish her link with Ship.

"Do we have an accord?"

Silence, then, *you continue to impress and amuse me, Vestara Khai. Don't think that you will be able to continue to shut me out without consequences. I was created not to serve the Sith, but to train the apprentices of the next Sith Empire. If you fail to adhere to the standards I expect of a Sith, then you are Sith no longer.*

"You did not answer my question," Vestara guided the Meditation Sphere out of the lunar spacedock.

I serve you so long as our goals remain aligned. The second they diverge, I will seek someone more worthy of my services.

"That will do," Vestara remarked. "Now stay silent and out of my head. I have rebels to crush."

The seconds passed without sound, the Meditation Sphere dropping into the atmosphere of Erilnar and swooping towards its goal. It cast a dark shadow over the land as it followed the sun's path. Well before the island chain that contained the rebels, they could see the amassed ground forces standing by. The generals probably had to be wondering why they were being made to wait so far away from the magma tunnel openings, especially if they were supposed to catch any escaping rebels. They were about to learn that answer shortly.

"We're on station, Saber Khai," Airia reported. The Meditation Sphere hovered over a landmass several dozen kilometers away from the rebel base, looking like a great eye gazing about the suddenly darkened land.

"Activating weapon systems," Vestara voiced. "Tyros, begin channeling your energy into the Force-transmitters now."

The Tyros all sank to their knees and entered a deep trance. Through the Force, Vestara could feel them channel their strength into the array of focusing crystals that powered Ship's main weapon. Made at a time when it was commonplace to merge technology and the Force, Ship's primary cannon was the only thing

that kept the millennia-old vessel from truly being obsolete. No shields or armor plating could withstand a concentrated blast of Force energy. Seen by others as a column of white light, the beam was only as powerful as the individual powering it. The more energy that went into the crystals, the more powerful the output.

Vestara made sure the target coordinates were locked in and joined the Tyros, adding to the growing nexus forming in the Meditation Sphere's underbelly. The Force swelled and swelled, a vast potential just waiting to be unleashed.

Vitam was the first to emerge from the trance. If he had given any further, his own life would have been in danger. Airia and Jesdan withdrew seconds later, their combined strength already making any shot damaging to most space-borne vessels. Vestara continued to give, letting the Force dictate to her when enough was enough. She emerged from the meld with the vessel drained, but confident in knowing that enough energy had been given to the main cannon.

"Target locked on," Vestara said coolly, gazing out the viewport.

"All systems still in the green," Vitam nodded.

"Maintaining stable containment of Force energies," Airia reported.

"Firing primary weapon," Vestara said, gesturing towards the control panel. A level was pulled down, and the entire ship vibrated as the mass of Force-energy was unleashed in a devastating column of light.

The beam lanced through the air and bored down into the ground, throwing up a cloud of dust and flame. The organic material in the target area was vaporized, their own life-energies being added into the beam as if sucked out by a vacuum.

"Narrow cannon aperture," Vestara directed.

"Focusing the beam," Jesdan moved another dial. "Aperture at minimum possible dilation."

The beam of white light narrowed until it was barely wider than a lightsaber. It continued to pulse as it dug into the ground, steam and smoke surrounding the contact point. A narrow hole formed as rock was melted away by the intense beam of destructive Force-energy, and the beam sliced down even deeper.

"Reaching depletion of Force-reserves in twenty-seconds," Airia announced, being the only one still partially in a trance.

"Minimal seismic activities on sensors," Vitam called out.

"Depletion of reserves of ten seconds."

"We're not going to go deep enough," Vestara gritted her teeth. She closed her eyes and once again made contact with the Force transmitters and crystal array. With others onboard, Vestara was very hesitant about weakening herself any further. At the same time, it wasn't like she had a choice if she wanted the mission to succeed. She gritted her teeth. Well, at least if they were going to stab her in the back, she'd be giving them the perfect chance.

"Saber Khai is maintaining Force-reserve levels," Airia reported.

"Focusing crystals nearing burn-out," Jesdan warned.

"They were never meant for such a prolonged firing," Vitam replied. He read the control console before him. "Still no significant seismic activity."

"Transmitter One, Three, Five have burnt out. Crystal Two and Five have burnt out," Airia announced. "Power output diminishing."

"Seismic activity increasing!" Vitam said with a fist-pump.
"Detecting large spikes in plate-tectonic movement."

"Saber Khai, break off, we have reached our goal!" Jesdan shouted.

Vestara withdrew, but felt weaker than she'd ever been and sagged to Ship's deck. Not even during Lady Rhea's sadistic training regimens had she ever felt so drained and exhausted.

"There! A volcanic eruption!"

From her prone position, Vestara saw one of the previously dormant volcanoes attached to the island chain come to life in violent fashion. Massive clouds of ash and soot were shot up into the air in a giant gray mushroom cloud and jets of super-heated air raced outwards, steamrolling anything in its path. A second eruption blasted out kilometers away as the Force-assisted earthquakes reopened old wounds in the ground.

"Force reserves expended," Airia stood and joined the others in

watching the destruction.

What they were witnessing was an example of the phrase 'the power of the Force,' with the very ground parting, lakes boiling away, and magma rising from crevices all over. The island-chain the rebels had been holed up on was only just beginning to feel the effects. Tectonic plates shifted violently and tried to settle, only to shift once more in protest of the other's movement. Millennia-old magma tubes were suddenly brought to life as magma was pushed up from beneath the surface of the planet.

"Comm reports wide-spread damage spreading outside of the target area," Jesdan voiced in alarm. "Seismic activity reported for at least fifty square kilometers and growing!"

"What have we done?" Airia whispered, aghast.

"What we had to do," Vitam answered emotionlessly, stepping back from his station.

Vestara's eyes flicked to him, even as the other two remained in disbelief at the sight unfolding before them. He locked eyes with her, a hand resting casually on the hilt of his parang. Even if she wanted to fight back, her limbs weren't obeying and her Force reserves had been depleted to dangerous levels. With what little she had left, she could sense that Vitam hadn't given as much of his strength as he had initially appeared to have given.

He knelt down next to Vestara, appearing to anyone else to be a concerned Tyro checking on his superior.

"What were you promised?" Vestara murmured softly.

"Does it matter?" Vitam replied, his voice equally soft as his parang was slipped free of its sheath.

"Power, wealth, both?" Vestara asked in turn. "Kaara does not care for anyone besides herself, and maybe her brother."

"And you care too much," Vitam returned, shaking his head.

"You can imagine it already, can't you, the fame you will receive upon my death?" Vestara asked mildly, keeping her voice low. "Might even be promoted to Saber and serve on High Lord Taalon's personal staff."

"And all I have to do is slit your throat." Vitam grinned bringing the parang up to Vestara's throat. "You really should have stayed on Kesh."

"And you have quite the imagination," Vestara replied coolly. "Your feelings betrayed you."

"You knew my intent long before, it doesn't matter."

"Not me, fool."

There was a rush of air and Vitam's arm holding the parang suddenly fell to the ground next to the two Sith. Vitam blinked dumbly at his severed limb, shortly before his head went flying in the opposite direction as a third parang sliced through the air.

"Thank you," Vestara exhaled, pushing Vitam's body off her.

"You're our Saber," Airia replied, looking slightly shaken as blood dripped from her glass blade.

"He always was ambitious," Jesdan remarked, shaking his head in disgust.

They both helped Vestara to her feet.

"Kill me and be highly rewarded by Kaara," Vestara remarked with a raised eyebrow.

"And be sent on a suicide mission so no one but her knows what happened," Jesdan shook his head. "One of my friends served as her Tyro, one of five she commanded into battle. None of them survived. I'd rather take my chances with a marked Saber than one that will stab me in the back."

"Airia?" Vestara noticed that the Keshiri teen was still staring at Vitam's body.

"S...sorry...Saber Khai," Airia swallowed heavily. "I knew Vitam from an early age. My family served his, his father was my mentor when it was learned I could use the Force. He was always kind to me."

"His father?"

"High Lord Ahlarin Dals."

"When I said I'd take my chances with a marked Saber, I think I might have spoken too soon," Jesdan deadpanned. "Just how many of the Circle of Lords do you intend to take on at once? You have the Grand Lord and High Lord Taalon against you, and more than likely High Lord Dals when he finds out his boy is dead."

"By my hand," Vestara voiced, staring at the Keshiri Tribe member onboard. "You are blameless."

"But..."

"You would prefer High Lord Dals pursues you?"

"I...no, Saber Khai...thank you," Airia swallowed, her head bowed. "What do you think was offered to Vitam?"

"Something he believed worth dying for," Vestara replied, shaking her head in disgust.

"Receiving incoming comm from the capitol."

"This should be good," Vestara remarked, removing her facemask and stepping up to the holo-comm unit. "Saber Khai here."

"*The mission has been a success?*" Kaara asked without missing a beat. If she had been the one to turn Vitam, she showed no signs of it.

Vestara checked the read-out. "Yes. The entire landmass the rebels made their base from is either covered in lava now, or destroyed in the ground-quakes. The military forces are reporting only a few survivors making it out of the tunnels."

"Drop your Tyros off to reinforce the forces on the ground and then return the Meditation Sphere to spacedock. I will await your report at the capitol."

"Understood."

The holo blinked off.

"Saber Khai?"

"They are legitimate orders," Vestara shook her head. "I am expecting the both of you to survive. To have every Tyro under me perish on the first planet of this campaign is not a distinction I want to share with Saber Kaara."

"Understood."

"Do you think Saber Kaara will try something on your return? No offense meant, Saber Khai, but you are not exactly in a condition to fight."

"Fighting with Force, parang, and lightsaber is only one way to fight, Tyro Airia," Vestara directed the ship to land at a staging point. "Though it is often times the most efficient."

"No matter what type of fight, we expect you to win, Saber Khai," Jesdan remarked. "For the Tribe, of course."

Vestara smiled crookedly. "Of course."

DL-V-DL

"Was that lesson meant for me, Ship?" Vestara murmured, eyes closed in meditation as she recovered her energy reserves in the bare apartment she had been allocated.

Which lesson were you referring to?

"Vitam."

The dead Tyro?

"Waste of life," Vestara said disdainfully.

How did you come to the conclusion that I bore any responsibility?

"Like the Tyros, my first thought was that Kaara or High Lord Taalon had put him up to it," Vestara said coolly, hands balling into fists. "But to have my own Tyro kill me onboard the Meditation Sphere, with witnesses that would likewise need removal. It was amateurish and not thought out at all."

I did nothing more than to free his mind of doubts.

"Removing his inhibitions is the same as commanding him to kill."

*It was the impression you left on him that pushed him to kill once his inhibitions were gone. I've told you before, Vestara Khai, you have become weak since I first encountered you. The Tyro saw it, saw you acquiesce to those who should be bowing to **you**. Saw you avoiding confrontation, letting others rise at your expense. The rage fueled him,*

his ambitions were being snuffed out before his very eyes. If it were not for you, he'd have been on the front lines.

"Or so he thought," Vestara's lips barely moved. With Ship all but admitting it had tried to have her killed, it meant that Kaara and the others plotting against her still had yet to make their move. But she had to brush those thoughts aside for the moment as she refocused on keeping Ship from reading her mind too deeply. "There is a fine line between dreams, aspirations and desires, and reality. Just because we wish something to occur, doesn't necessarily mean it should."

Were you powerful enough, anything you wish done will be accomplished. Even conquering death itself.

"I'm not interested in immortality," Vestara couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity of it.

Do you not want your name to live on long after you rejoin the Force? No one remembers the weak, the foot-soldiers in Naga Sadow's army. But everyone remembers Naga Sadow. Everyone remembers the empire he built and the ripples he left in the Force that still affect people even today.

"I've read the histories, Ship. Naga Sadow died an old, lonely man, betrayed by Freedon Nadd after teaching Nadd everything he knew. In the end, all of his power, all of his accomplishments, mattered little. That is not a fate I want to repeat. Think, Ship. If your ways are the right way to be a Sith, if your teachings are supposed to build the foundation of a new Sith Empire, then why isn't there a Sith Empire in existence today? If the instructions you were programmed to pass on to the next group of Sith were so vital to the definition of Sith, then what happened to the ones that programmed you?"

The Sith were a power to be reckoned with for millennia. Whole armies swept across the galaxy and kept the Jedi in check. It was only after they diverged from the practices taught by the Sith of my time did they begin to fall. As an instructor to the next generation of Sith, it is my primary directive to avoid a repeat of such actions. Vitam's death was necessary in your instruction, a reminder that as far as you have come, you still have much to learn when it comes to being Sith.

"There are many ways to be a Sith."

Just as there are many paths to your own destruction. You can ignore

me when you desire, Vestara Khai, but do not think I have finished teaching you what you need to know. Of your entire planet, only you had the potential required to bring back the old ways. I will not have you waste it when you could be so much more than you are now.

"I don't need a relic of dead men telling me what to be." Vestara felt she had enough energy reserves to raise her tech-Force shield once more, and she shut out the Meditation Sphere. She instantly felt that part of her mind grow vacant and couldn't help but sag in silent relief.

The chime to her door rang, and she tensed once more. It was one thing to block out a mechanical construct, but blocking out a fellow Tribe member was different. Especially since she was still recovering from her near Force burn-out.

Slowly she withdrew from her meditations, rising and summoning her saber and parang into her hands at the same time. The weapons shot up from the floor on either side of her, and she spun them around and sheathed them in her utility belt. She could already sense who was behind the door and it surprised her. She had been worried about what her enemies would do next, and it appears she was about to find out.

"Saber Kaara," Vestara greeted, standing in the doorway.

"Saber Khai," Kaara returned tonelessly. Behind her were two other Sabers and a floating holocam droid.

"What brings you here?"

"I am here to announce a challenge," Kaara replied, stone-faced. "To the death if need be."

"You're declaring a Kaggath?" Vestara's eyebrows shot up.

"Yes," Kaara tilted her head in slight acknowledgment.

"Fine," Vestara locked her own emotions away.

"The arena?"

"This planet."

"Sun-up in two days, we will begin," Kaara said coolly.

"Agreed."

Kaara nodded once more, and then turned and left with the holocam droid and Sabers.

Vestara let the door close, and then turned and her crooked smile returned in force. Per the rules of Kaggath, Kaara was allowed use of all the forces under her command. And since High Lord Taalon had granted her command of the planet, all Tribe forces on the planet were hers.

All except the two Tyros directly under Vestara.

The main plus was that by specifying the planet as the arena, Kaara could not call upon any of the ships or forces in the lunar shipyards. But Vestara couldn't call on Ship either.

Kaara was no doubt expecting Vestara to use the short time between now and the next day's sundown to go to ground or entrench herself somewhere. Declaring Kaggath was hardly a subtle move, something Vestara knew was within the repertoire of the not-so-imaginative Kaara. But at the same time, it also made any outright attempt to kill Vestara fully legal in Tribe law. Vestara, of course, could have refused the challenge. But if she had, *she* would have lost a legal reason to get rid of Kaara too.

But even as she began to plot a way to get out of this latest mess, the advice her Jedi had given her early on somehow surfaced in her thoughts.

*"You don't have to go out of your way to make enemies. A strong enemy is great, but making them a strong ally is even better. You Sith have a saying about the weak being ruled by the strong, that peers are only waiting to stab each other in the back to advance. But wasn't that what brought down your Sith Empire in the first place? Let's say you make an enemy you **know** you can beat. Then you beat the enemy, stab them, slice them, whatever. Dead enemy. Another rival sees you stab and slice and thinks you're getting too strong, so they challenge you too. And maybe you beat them, maybe not. But if you do, even stronger enemies are going to start paying attention. Who will you have at your back? A lot of dead people. But if you made that first enemy an ally. If you convinced them that the both of you can grow even stronger if you weren't trying to kill each other..."*

"I will forever worry about my former enemy stabbing me in the back. It is the Sith way."

*"You're a Sith, is it **your** way? Show your mistaken enemy that your way is stronger, and you'll make it the new Sith way when you have enough people having your back."*

"Your plan will get me killed, slave."

"Probably. But if it works, it'll also get you an army you can rely on. An army, so when that super-powerful enemy looks at you, he or she will want to ally instead of fight you. An army, so you can build that empire you've been telling me about."

Vestara growled under her breath, her lopsided smile turning into a scowl.

Stupid Jedi.

What annoyed her most was that he was right. Kaara might have been a brute with very little finesse and foresight, but she was also a very powerful Force-user and formidable fighter. Killing Kaara might be doable, but then she'd be depriving the Tribe of a skilled warrior over...what...a playground game? But to make Kaara an ally? That seemed almost as impossible as ending the Kaggath peacefully.

Fact one, Kaara was as ambitious and power-hungry as most of the Tribe. Fact two, Kaara was completely loyal to the Tribe. Fact three, Kaara hated her guts.

Things weren't looking good. Stupid Jedi for complicating things more. Everything was so simple through the lenses of the Sith Code. You either had power, or you were ruled over by someone more powerful. None of this Jedi make-nice-pet-the-predator-and-hope-it-doesn't-tear-your-hand-off, you're doing it because it's the right thing, complicating garbage.

Then again, the alternative was likely engaging in a battle that would kill her two Tyros and make her look very weak if she survived.

"Think, Vestara. Think!" Vestara pounded the stone countertop in the kitchenette with a fist, wracking her mind for something that would allow her to come on top.

The door chime rang again. Vestara glanced up at the clock and was startled to see she had been stewing for nearly a half-hour. Cautiously, she answered the door again. This time she was

surprised to see her two surviving Tyros, as well as nearly a dozen others in the hallway behind them.

"Tyros?"

"Saber Khai," Jesdan began. Though he and Airia were both Tyros, and she was older, he being human meant that he was superior in status. "All of the Tribe heard of the challenge Saber Kaara put before you. Tyro Airia and myself have convinced some of the Tribe on this planet to back you. After all, if it wasn't for you transferring them to the hospitals planet-side, they might have been fighting on the frontlines in less than optimal condition."

Why did things have to become more complicated? Vestara mentally screamed in her mind, even as she put on an icy smile and gestured for the others to enter her apartment. "Thank you for your support. You did warn them that I am not the most...traditional when it comes to our views?"

"We know, Saber Khai," one of the older men in the group chuckled. "You are either roundly cursed by the Grand Lord and those who support him, or silently praised by those too weak to openly back you."

"Saber Khai, my father," Jesdan motioned to the man. "Sith Master Golan Belis. I told him how you protected Airia and myself during the invasion, how you deserved our support."

As the crowd parted, Vestara could see that the Sith Master was missing one leg and had a repulsor-amp on the stub to keep him upright.

"Mortar round took it right off," Golan shrugged. "The doctors used something called bacta to heal the wound, but the leg was a loss. They are creating a robotic prosthesis while I wait on this planet for the High Lord's call."

Vestara searched the others in the room and found them in various states of healing. The downside to healing trances was that it left one vulnerable and took a long time. If the wound was potentially fatal, a healing trance was not the best way to heal the wound. Neither could a trance restore lost limbs or eyes.

"You are all here to throw in your lot with me?" Vestara asked.

"In the eyes of the Tribe, the only use most of us have now is

cannon fodder," Golan gestured to his missing leg. "You know as well as I do, Saber Khai, that we're dead weight now. If we're going to go out, at least it will be in the time honored-traditions of our ancestors, in Kaggath, than back on Kesh waiting for death to come."

Vestara grimaced inwardly. "So you expect me to lead you all against the forces of Saber Kaara in a grand show down so you can have an honorable death?"

Nods all around had Vestara silently cursing the Force. Not that she didn't appreciate the support, she just wished her support was less....suicidal.

"We'll make sure you have the chance to deliver a killing blow," a wounded Tyro voiced confidently.

Vestara turned to look out the apartment window. It would be so much easier to do that. To send them into battle against Kaara's forces and take advantage of that opportunity to end a thorn in her side. To not do that meant that she would have a small army of very disgruntled Sith wondering why she wasn't playing by the rules and sending them to their deaths.

Life so wasn't fair.

"I am going to win the Kaggath," Vestara said slowly, staring out at the cityscape. "But I am going to win it my way. Per the rules, every military asset on this planet will be something Kaara can draw upon. If we fight her militarily, we'll be crushed no matter what plan we come up with. You all might want valiant deaths following an ancient Sith tradition. But I'd prefer if you lived valiantly instead, helping me create a Sith galaxy with the Tribe at the helm. So, we will not fight them, and I will not be giving you the deaths you desire. If that discourages you, you may leave. Maybe Kaara will give you the death you are looking for."

She turned back to face the group of Sith, her pale face still showing no emotion as she locked eyes with each of them in turn.

"If, however, you wish to bring glory to the Tribe by living, then I more than welcome your support. It might be your bodies that were destroyed in the fighting, but your minds are still working. If we do this right, not only will we have won, but we will have done so without weakening the Tribe."

"Is that even possible?" Another wounded Saber, burns slathered with bacta paste covering most his face.

Vestara arched an eyebrow. "If it is not now, we will make it possible. We are Sith, there is no challenge we cannot overcome."

DL-Chapter End-DL

A\N:Like FtF, not sure when chapter three will be posted, still trying to work on multiple stories at once and deal with issues related to my health thingy. The story will be 5-6 chapters long in total and will end just as Legacy of the Jedi begins.

3. Chapter 3

Chapter 3

DL-I-DL

The thick white fog that smothered the coastline began to glow a soft white as the first rays of sunlight hit; the glowing layer of light contrasting sharply with the black sandy ground. In the swirling whorls of mist and vapor stood two figures in near-identical black and silver garb, the lower half of their faces obscured by their masks, baleful yellow eyes locked. The two young women were several dozen meters apart on the shoreline, letting the cold morning breeze whip their black capes about, neither moving. Their only living audience was the low-lying forest of twisted black trees, the bare branches contorting and forming seemingly menacing shadows against the fog.

Above, two holo-cam droids flitted about, trying to maintain a constant picture as the white tendrils of mist continued to play coy with their imaging tech.

"Vestara Khai, by the rules of Kaggaath, I denounce you and deem you to be unworthy of life," Kaara spoke in a soft whisper, her voice lacking any emotion. "Before this day is through, all of the Tribe will see as I do and forever will your name be ruined."

Vestara showed no reaction other than to free both her weapons. Her parang glinted, her crimson blade shimmered, and the armored plating she wore gleamed against the red light. She crossed both weapons in front of herself and bowed respectfully. "So you say."

A burst of Force energy temporarily cleared the clouds around Kaara. The older woman used the Force to call her parang and lightsaber to her hands, and took up an entirely different combat pose than Vestara. Where Vestara held her lightsaber high and parang low, Kaara held both her weapons at chest-height. A mental command, and the clasps to Kaara's cape unlatched, and the black cloth fluttered away in the morning wind. She was a tall woman, a warrior's build with matching reflexes. Like her brother, Kaara was from a lineage that prided themselves on their combat ability. They liked to boast that it had been one of their ancestors who had personally slain two of the red Sith all those years ago when the decision to purge the red Sith had been made. Kaara stood proud and tall, chin thrust out as she planted her legs into the dark sand.

The nimbus of red light from her saber reflected off the surrounding fog, completely encasing her in red light.

"So I say," Kaara nodded.

Vestara tensed, feeling the warning in the Force a split second before Kaara burst into action. Kaara might have been classified as a brute, but she was a very, very, skilled brute. The older Tribe Saber darted across the black sand, the thick fog pulled into her wake as her Force-assisted movement temporarily created a vacuum.

Vestara barely raised her saber in time to block Kaara's blade, and missed Kaara's parang entirely. She hissed as the glass blade lashed a shallow cut from her cheek to the corner of her left eye. Kaara moved to slash at her once more, and Vestara had to use a blast of Force energy to put some distance between the two.

The older Saber slid backwards across the beach, but then planted her feet and launched herself at Vestara again. As she barreled towards Vestara, both of Kaara's weapons flashed back and forth in a dizzying display, the more experienced fighter using her parang to reflect the light of the lightsaber directly into Vestara's eyes at the very last moment. Vestara staggered and received a glancing lightsaber strike to the armor plate of her leg and a parang rebounded off the armor of her opposite arm. A Force blast, this time from Kaara, sent Vestara tumbling in a very undignified fashion across the beach.

Kaara charged Vestara, but the younger Saber threw up a fistful of sand into the blonde's face. The unconventional tactic had Kaara twisting her body to the side to avoid the drill-like attack of Vestara's follow-up strike. Vestara's parang screeched as it sliced against Kaara's shoulder armor, while her saber left a glowing gash in her chestplate. Kaara backhanded Vestara in rage, Vestara elbowed her in turn, and then with both spinning their weapons, they slammed the glass blades and lightsabers into each other in a volcanic hiss.

Their weapons locked up for a second, and then both pulled away at the same time and tried to gain the upper hand. Back and forth across the black, sandy beach the two Sabers battled. For the most part, Vestara was kept on the defensive, Kaara's blurring movements near impossible to keep up with even with Vestara's Force-enhanced senses.

On Kaara's next lunging attack, Vestara deactivated her lightsaber and stepped back into the fog. Kaara staggered forward off balance, and when she turned around, Vestara was nowhere to be seen. Kaara surveyed her surroundings before she too turned off her lightsaber.

For several long minutes, all was quiet. The holo-cam droids frantically looked around the white soup for any sign of either of them, but came up empty. A subtle click, the sound of a branch breaking, and both droids zoomed off towards the source location.

Vestara kept her senses extended all around her as she trod as silently as she could through the skeletal forest. The sand of the beach had made her use more energy than she had wanted. Though she considered herself to be in relatively good shape, Kaara would have outlasted her on that uneven surface. The black sand gave way to a much more stable expanse of brown and black dirt. All she had to do is figure out if she was the hunter or hunted.

Another branch snapped, she jerked her parang up in guard position, but nothing came out of the mist. Distant thunder rumbled, another cool breeze whipping through the airy clouds around her. Her boots slid along the coarse ground, her every muscle poised to move in an instant. A branch snapped behind her and she whirled around. But again nothing. Her breathing came out slow and steady, even if it felt as if her heart was going to beat right out of her chest.

A whistling sound, and Vestara caught the hurled parang with her own, then flung the weapon back into the mist. Feet running towards her in rapid succession.

Lightsabers reactivated in unison, with Vestara side-stepping to avoid Kaara's sudden attack from the opposite direction. Her lightsaber slid along Kaara's, their blades crackling and spitting from contact. The Force alerted Vestara to danger and she looked up in time to see Kaara's parang boomerang back towards her. Headbutting Kaara, Vestara twisted herself out of the way and heard the curved, glass blade mow down several of the spindly black trees. Vestara then ducked as Kaara's lightsaber blazed where her head had been, and then had to roll out of the way at the follow-up strike.

Vestara intercepted the next saber strike, then whipped her parang out to draw blood along Kaara's extended arm. Kaara retaliated with a point-blank Force-shove that knocked Vestara through

another thicket of black-bark trees. Fortunately for the younger Sith, her armor protected her from any damage. Unfortunately, the attack had sent both Vestara's lightsaber and her parang flying in opposite directions. And Vestara now had a leaping Sith bearing down on her.

She clasped her hands together and sent the cluster of broken branches and trees around her flying up to meet the older Sith. Kaara blasted through the debris as if it wasn't even there. At the same time, Vestara summoned her own saber and it blazed to life. Still pinned on the ground, Vestara gritted her teeth as Kaara pressed her own blade downwards.

"This fight is over," Kaara said dispassionately, slowly applying more and more strength to her weapon.

Vestara exhaled shakily, drawing on her reserves as her blade and Kaara's began to get closer and closer to her neck. "It isn't."

"I might still spare your life, if you beg me," Kaara said coolly, now kneeling over Vestara with her weight pressing their blades ever lower.

Vestara managed to shift beneath the oppressive pressure, but that only made Kaara press down even harder. The two blades sizzled as they made contact with the top of Vestara's mask, burning away the material micrometer by micrometer.

"Beg me," Kaara repeated, though she sounded like she didn't care at all.

The buzz of the two lightsabers filled Vestara's ears and she knew her mask was about to give way. Her yellowed gaze filled with anger and hate, but those emotions wouldn't be enough.

"Please." Vestara gritted out.

"Please' what?"

"Please Saber Kaara, spare me. I admit defeat," Vestara said spitefully.

"And you would place yourself and all of your resources under my command?"

"I will," Vestara bowed her head.

Both lightsabers deactivated in Force-synchronization. Kaara straightened to her full height and looked down disdainfully at the younger woman. "Kneel."

Vestara did as ordered, her eyes flicking up towards Kaaras. A silent communication passed between them before Vestara turned her gaze to the ground. As she did, she couldn't help but grin beneath the remains of her mask. With that last exchange, she knew that her plan was now in motion.

I-I-I-I

"There is still time to surrender," Kaara voiced calmly, the waves from the nearby lake lapping at the black, sandy shore. The sun had not yet risen and the chilly pre-dawn air swirled around them. "All of those who would have sided with you have recognized their mistake and abandoned you. You are on your own on this world."

"That was not why I asked to meet you here," Vestara replied back, just as coolly. Her words seemed to stretch out in the thick morning fog that blanketed the shoreline.

"So I surmised."

"I have a proposition for you, Saber Kaara. One that will make the both of us indispensable to the Tribe and make the Tribe even stronger."

"You intend to bargain for your life?" Distaste for that action clear in Kaara's normally toneless voice.

"No," Vestara chuckled. "I intend to get you promoted to Sith Master and serve the Tribe as best I can."

Kaara did not respond, the sound of the lake washing up against the shore filling in the silence.

"We both know that if we go full out with the Kaggath we will be eliminating resources the Tribe can better use elsewhere," Vestara said smoothly. "We may both hate each other with extreme passion, but it does not mean that we are working for opposite purposes. We both want the Tribe to succeed, want the Sith Empire of old to return to the galaxy. But if we throw our resources into the Kaggath, that will not happen. The galaxy is a big enough foe without having to worry about the same infighting that brought down the Sith Empire and allowed the Jedi to reign."

"I have publically declared Kaggath against you. To revoke it would be..."

"I'm not asking you to revoke it," Vestara cut her off. "I'm not asking you to surrender to me, or to look foolish in the eyes of the Tribe. That's **my** role."

"Your role?" Kaara's blonde eyebrows shot up inquisitively.

"The Grand Lord and many others want me to fail," Vestara nodded. "If I succeed against one challenge, they will only throw something else at me. Again, Tribe time and politics that can be better used elsewhere. So, I will do what he expects and fail."

"You are going to deliberately lose the Kaggath," Kaara said emotionlessly. Then, proving that she had some skill in politics, continued. "Thus making the Grand Lord and others believe you are under my control and sufficiently cowed. With you losing your standing, they will turn their attention elsewhere, leaving you free to act."

"Exactly," Vestara nodded. "In public, I will be your subordinate, in service to you however you deem. Privately, however, you will allow me complete autonomy and provide support if I should desire it. In exchange, I will increase your efficiency ratings and help you ascend to the rank of Sith Master. We will be able to best serve the Tribe if we pool our strengths. Think of it, Saber Kaara. Your strength and martial skills backed by my own ability to plan and maneuver politically."

"There...there is some possibility in that," Kaara said after a moment. "But under no circumstances can anyone know of the arrangement."

"It would defeat the purpose," Vestara nodded. "Even my own faction does not know what I have planned. When I told them to surrender to you, they're expecting me to give some signal to act against you."

"There is no guarantee that we will be not betray the other," Kaara sounded intrigued.

"No, there isn't," Vestara grinned. "But isn't that half the fun of it. We'll each keep each other on our toes expecting betrayal, and then be pleasantly surprised when none materializes. I meant what I said, Saber...no...Sith Master Kaara. I want to serve the Tribe, I want the Tribe to succeed. Any other disagreement or complication seems trivial in comparison."

Kaara regarded Vestara with unblinking eyes, her face betraying none of

her thoughts. Finally, she blinked very slowly. "You will make the Kaggath look good?"

"So that none who are smart challenge your saber skills ever again," Vestara tilted her head in turn.

"There are still several hours before the fight, before the holocams get here. Shall we go our separate ways now?"

"In a moment. If you're onboard," Vestara smiled victoriously behind her mask. "Then let me tell you the plan for your ascent."

DL-II-DL

Three weeks later

"Congratulations on your victories, brother." Kaara greeted her brother as the latter stepped off the shuttle.

"And congratulations on putting Khai in her place," Vran returned. "You should have killed her."

"The slave-collar helps," Kaara replied in her customary short manner. "If you are here again, Centrality has been subjugated?"

Vran made a noise of annoyance. "The last hold-outs have fled to a planet called Renatasia Four. High Lord Taalon dispatched some of our greener Tyros to deal with it. He also sent me to ensure that everything is in order on this planet."

"Everything is as it should be. I understand that the other of Centrality's agro-worlds was subdued without any Tribe losses," Kaara spoke as they walked into the capitol building and out of the pouring rain.

"Yes. The strategy you sent to High Lord Taalon worked perfectly. Our fighters avoided the Centrality forces and simply destroyed the weather satellites that Dilonexa used to manage their dozen-kilometer-wide tornadoes. We then waited as the tornadoes ravaged the planet for us. High Lord Taalon was most impressed."

"I was doing my duty for the Tribe," Kaara said in turn.

"You do it well," a sour note in Vran's Force-presence caused Kaara to look at him in amusement. "High Lord Taalon wishes you join him on his flagship. I am to oversee things here in the interim."

"Just me?"

"Is there another you wish to bring with you?"

"A few of my more trusted supporters, and Saber Khai," Kaara said almost as if she was completely bored. "I'd rather not you kill her in a fit of rage."

"Now that she knows her place, she should not be a problem if she remained here."

"At the very least, I can give High Lord Taalon the pleasure of eliminating her himself."

Vran stopped in his tracks, his Force-signature shifting into one of suspicion. "Sister, you would not be plotting against me, would you?"

"You are still of some use to the Tribe. I think I will keep you around."

"Sister."

"Do not worry, brother. It would upset mother and father if their favorite child died before he got to see the rise of a Sith galaxy. They had such high hopes for you."

"Until I killed them."

"We killed them. You killed mother, but father fell to my blade."

"It was their insistence that we honored the old ways," Vran shrugged without emotion.

"You are neither my master nor my enemy, Vran. I believe that makes you exempt from the old ways."

"What do you have planned, Kaara?"

"When I am elevated to the rank of Master, I will ensure you are in my command," Kaara answered simply. "Together we will cement our spot in the empire we are creating."

Vran glare communicated that he did not fully trust his sister's motives, but at the same time he had no proof otherwise. With a swish of his own cape, he continued to walk down the hallway.

"Take my shuttle. High Lord Taalon wishes to meet with you as soon as possible."

"As you command, brother," a note of mocking making its appearance in Kaara's normally emotionless voice as she watched her brother's rain-slickened figure disappear further down the hall. "Make sure to have the serving staff wipe the floor. It would be embarrassing for the both of us if you were to slip."

I-II-I-II-I

Vestara Khai couldn't help but let a crooked smile crease her scarred lips. In the back of the shuttle, the smile went unnoticed, which was probably a good thing. The slave-collar around her neck was mildly uncomfortable, and under most situations would probably have been highly humiliating. But at the moment, it served its purpose.

Centrality had been one of the many minor powers in the galaxy that she had studied during her foraging expeditions off Kesh. Had contributed a freighter or two, and a few cargo ships full of raw material to the Tribe. She had studied the worlds so she could direct her raiding parties to the best possible targets with minimal losses. Much like she did in her first foray with the Aduba Starhoppers, she had swung her forces through, took what she could without drawing attention to themselves, and left. In fact, it had been partly due to her own reports about Centrality and its capabilities that the Circle of Lords had chosen it for the honor to be the first of many in the Tribe's expansionistic tendencies.

She wasn't so egotistical to admit that she was a tactical savant or knew how to command the might of the Tribe. But at the time, it had looked like she might receive command of a ship or two when the Tribe left Kesh, and she wasn't about to get herself blown up in the first of what was going to be many campaigns. And studying the worlds of Centrality had paid off handsomely. She knew that someone probably would have eventually come up with the same strategy she had come up with for Dilonexa's weather satellites. She had just had longer to plan for it.

She also had a sinking feeling as to why Kaara was being recalled to the frontlines after so many Tribe 'successes' against Centrality.

The raw-material transports she had raided nearly two years earlier were full of the rare-metals and other ores needed to create a starship. According to the freighter computers, there had been other

transports—many others in fact—and Vestara had been curious as to their destination. But Sith Lord Umarn, the man who had been placed in the supervisory position, had overruled her and opted to return to Kesh with their bounty instead.

Despite the abundance of ships in the Tribe's control, most all were considered 'out-of-date' even by modern standards. Their most recent vessel was the antiquated *Victory I*-class Star Destroyer, with all other ships being sixty years or older. If Centrality had been making a new ship with the latest in turbolaser and shield tech, they'd be able to launch a successful counter-attack and even down the *Omen*. And Vestara couldn't come up with anything without knowing the capabilities of this 'new' ship.

"Speak your thoughts, slave," Kaara barked, entering the hold of the shuttle.

Vestara inclined her head in deference. Trying to one-up Kaara or match social-standings with the other Saber was not a high priority at the moment. "Saber Kaara, I am merely thinking about why you are being recalled to the front when your brother, by all accounts, was successful in his campaigns."

"And?"

"There must be a problem that they thought you'd be better suited at solving," Vestara said carefully. She met the other Saber's eyes. "You know, like the plan *you* developed to ravage Dilonexa without any Tribe-life lost."

Kaara's eyes narrowed, briefly darting to the others with them. Two of them were Tyros Airia and Jesdan. The other six were Sabers that either served Kaara willingly or at Vestara's orders. "Explain."

"Saber Vran is a skilled dualist like yourself, a competent field-commander," Vestara again chose her words so that Kaara would not lose face. "But I am sure you understand that unlike yourself, he does not react wisely to things that frustrate him, unexpected challenges."

"Continue," Kaara said robotically.

"Simply put, Saber Kaara. I believe that Centrality had a shadow-plan in place, that when activated, caused the Tribe a great deal of trouble. High Lord Taalon and the other field-commanders don't wish to place their reputation on the line by coming up with a

failed stratagem, so they are planning on using you instead," even as she voiced her suspicions, Vestara was slowly became more and more convinced that she was right. Vran was everything the Tribe espoused; brutal, strong, an embodiment of violent passion. To sideline him now meant that something else was at play, something more than politics. "To confirm this, ask as soon as you are able, what our casualties were on the assault of Renatasia Four. If Centrality has a hidden weapon, it would have been stationed there."

Kaara nodded her head curtly. "I have received word that we are not to dock with High Lord Taalon's *Black Wave*. Instead we are to meet up with the *Dark Blade*, commanded by Lord Xal. I believe you are acquainted with his Saber, Ahri Raas?"

Vestara winced, mentally groaning and wondering what she had ever seen in her former sparring partner. His infatuation with her was getting ridiculous. "I am."

"Not a pleasant being?"

"Keshiri," Vestara summed up with a shrug. "Probably a move by High Lord Taalon to put another Keshiri on the path to the Circle of Lords."

Kaara's lips thinned, showing her own dislike for the native species of the planet they had been marooned on. After all, all the humans on Kesh had been brought up for thousands of years believing that they were superior to all other forms of life. That went doubly so if one was Force-sensitive. "Then we shall expect treason?"

"With Lord Xal and Saber Raas? Definitely."

"*Saber Kaara, on final approach vector.*" The pilot, one of Kaara's people, called back over the intercom.

Kaara studied Vestara for a moment and then procured the key for Vestara's slave-collar from her robes. Before it had even cleared Kaara's pocket, Vestara shook her head very slightly. Kaara tilted her head once in question, hand going slack in the pocket. The others in the cargo-hold glanced back and forth at the exchange, confusion at what had just happened clear. Instead, Kaara pulled out the pain-stimulator control and pressed it.

Vestara fell out of her seat, gasping and grasping at her collar.

"Definitely' what, slave?"

"Definitely, Mistress," Vestara choked out.

"You are no longer my equal, slave. Forget your place again and I'll give you to Saber Raas," Kaara said coldly, pocketing the device once more. "Perhaps he'll enjoy you even more."

"My life is yours," Vestara managed, trying to look as feeble as she could as she crawled back into her seat.

A lone eyebrow arched on Kaara's face, the only sign of her surprise, before she whirled to the others. "Be on your guard for treachery. Both from Lord Xal, and from this slave. She has known Saber Raas since childhood and it would not be beyond her to plot something."

"Yes, Saber Kaara," the others replied. "For the Tribe!"

The shuttle was drawn into the rectangular bay of the captured Star Destroyer, the sound of the guiding tractor beams pinging off the sides of the ship as it was brought through the mag-con field. As the landing claw directed the shuttle into its berth, Vestara ruefully rubbed at her neck. She wasn't bothered so much by the pain it could cause, but it was more the collar itself that chafed. The actual pain had been muted by the bubble of techForce her Jedi/slave had taught her to project. By creating a counter-field of electrical-magnetic energy just above her skin, she had been able to negate most of the painful effects of the collar. She weakly crawled back to her feet as the rest of the shuttle's occupants stood ready to board the larger vessel.

Unlike when Vestara and the others had boarded the Star Destroyer a year earlier, the *Dark Blade* was full of fighters and smaller craft, meaning that they had to exit via causeway and not the rear landing ramp. The ship shook slightly as the airlocks lined up. Once the seal was confirmed, Kaara gestured for the two Tyros to advance first. She then followed, pulling a leash attached to Vestara's collar. The other Sabers brought up the rear.

For a meeting with supposed allies, there was a discordant note of tension in the air.

"Welcome aboard, Saber Kaara."

"Lord Xal," Kaara clasped a fist to her chest and bowed her head.

"None of that, we are all friends here," Yuvar Xal waved her off. "And I see you've brought your slave with you, how droll."

"I did not want her causing trouble for my brother while I was away," Kaara said robotically. "But can we dispense with the pleasantries, Lord Xal? Just how many people did we lose trying to take Renatasia?"

The Circle Lord's smile became forced. "Whatever do you mean, *Saber Kaara*?"

"Your presence here, it is to see what plans I will come up with and then give the credit to Saber Raas, is it not?" Kaara continued with all the emotion of a rock.

"To make an enemy of the one who so easily subjugated Dilonexa is not on my list of things to do," Yuvar recovered quickly. "But High Lord Taalon did bid me to relay to you our latest plan of attack. I am sure with a cunning mind such as yours you'll be able to make the proper changes in real-time."

"Lord Xal, I will agree to no such arrangement until my question is answered." This time a hint of bloodlust and hostility flashed out from the Saber.

"I am the Lord here," Yuvar countered. "You will obey my command for the good of the Tribe."

"For the good of the Tribe, I cannot come up with a plan of attack without knowing the details of the previous attack," Kaara parried, much to Vestara's great surprise.

Then again, Vestara mused, if Kaara had been a run-of-the-mill Saber in the Tribe, Kaara would have cut her head off at the end of the Kaggath.

"This way," Yuvar said, matching Kaara's tone and gesturing down the immaculate black-paneled hallway. "Not entirely on topic, but would you mind parting with your slave? I will reimburse you of course, but my apprentice has...plans...for her and would be a very strong ally once in the Circle of Lords."

Vestara hid her nod by pretending to cough as if the collar was choking her. It was time to end a very minor thorn in her side. Though she felt some regret, ambition and thirst for power had changed Ahri into someone who was no longer the friend she once

thought of him as.

"A command of my own," Kaara replied immediately, as if she had been thinking just what Vestara could have been worth for a very long time. "Or your support in my ascension to the rank of Sith Master. Both, preferably."

"Both will be possible," Yuvar chuckled. "That eager to be rid of her?"

"You have no idea," Kaara delivered in monotone.

They entered a side meeting room where Ahri Raas and several more of Yuvar's supporters sat in waiting.

"Proceed with the briefing, Saber Raas," Yuvar directed.

"Yes, my Lord," Ahri clasped a hand to his chest. His eyes briefly darted towards Vestara's collared form before he hid his blatant desire for her by bending down to work the holo-emitter. "Our first assault on Renatasia two weeks ago ended with the loss of all lives sent to subjugate the world."

"How many?" Kaara voiced.

"The crews and soldier compliments of seven frigates and a light-cruiser," Ahri replied in turn. He pressed a button and the scene changed. "The second assault three days later was backed by the *Eternal Crusader* and thirty frigates. The *Eternal Crusader* and seventeen of the surviving frigates were forced to withdraw when the crews and soldier compliments of the leading frigates were killed before a shot was even fired."

"Just the crews?"

"Yes, the ships were still intact, but were lost to the Centran forces at Renatasia."

Yuvar spoke up. "Somehow the Centrals have developed a weapon that kills all organic life. What we will play for you now is the last security footage from some of the vessels before the crew died."

The holo changed to a vid-readout and Kaara and Vestara watched as everything appeared normal on the bridge of one of the Tribe's frigates. Then, a flash of green seemingly exploded throughout the bridge, dancing green flames leaping from crewmember to

crewmember in a hellish inferno. Most of the crew didn't even have time to scream before the green flame lit them up as if they were dry wood. It was over in mere seconds, remnants of some of the flame dancing across the leather coverings of some of the chairs.

"It is the same in all the recordings we were able to shift through. No amount of Force usage, nor blast-door or ray-shielding protected the crew from this green death."

"I will need time to analyze the..."

"Our people have already...."

"With all due respect, Lord Xal. Our people have twice failed and have turned to me for a solution," Kaara cut off the Circle Lord.

"Send the files to my quarters. Your apprentice may play with my slave as soon as I have confirmation from High Lord Taalon of a command of my own. Until then, she will stay where I can keep an eye on her."

DL-V-DL

"Ships are moving into position now," a sensor operator announced to those unable to see the holo-table. The image floating above was a transmitted view from five different frigates of the Renatasia system. On board the bridge of the *Dark Blade* a collection of individuals with their own agendas stood watch.

"Centran fleet at the edge of sensor range, frigates continuing their approach."

"I do not have to remind you that High Lord Taalon will be most displeased if this gambit of yours fails, Saber Kaara."

"You do not," Kaara answered in her customary clipped tones. "Do I have to remind you that your apprentice cannot play with my slave until what I have requested comes through?"

"If this gambit succeeds, then you will have more than earned the rank of Sith Master," Sith Lord Yuvar Xal answered with matching superiority. "Saber Raas, as she says. If she fails, it will be within my right to strip Saber Kaara of her slave anyways. Either way, you will be getting what you want."

"You are generous, Master," Ahri bowed his head slightly.

"Approaching outer danger zone," the sensor operator continued to narrate.

"Now we see if that green fire attacks only organic material," one of the other Sith Masters serving Yuvar answered.

"My plan will work," Kaara answered coolly, her eyes bearing down on the speaker. Vestara remained absolutely silent behind her, her own eyes glimmering in the light of the holoprojector. "To doubt me again is to voice your own ignorance."

"Mind your place, *Saber Kaara*." The Sith Master bit back.

"Enough," Yuvar drawled. "Let us see if Saber Kaara's plan is worth the material we have invested in it. Thirty frigates is no small portion of our fleet."

"Any less and they wouldn't be bait for the Centran forces."

"Look! The organic materials we have placed onboard have begun to combust!" One of the other Tribe members gasped, pointing at the holo on the lead frigate. The cages full of plant-life and vermin-type animals were starting to glow green, the animals themselves whirling about in panic.

"Now we will see which frequency and type of shielding will work the best," Kaara voiced. "Send in the next wave of ships, cage-shielding active."

"Command sent."

The view switched from the lead frigates, which were now swinging about to cover the frigates behind it, to the trailing vessels. The all-droid crew and remote-piloting systems meant that the vessels were completely unaffected by the green flames purging its deck and hallways of anything organic.

The view of the bridges of the second wave showed similar cages of organic matter, but this time shrouded in flickering fields of protective shielding. As this wave of ships pushed past the danger zone, flecks of green flame could be seen beginning to consume the chair padding and other natural materials. A majority of the cages were soon green bonfires mirroring the first wave of vessels, the flickering flames reducing the contents to ash within seconds.

Those watching viewed the display with increasing dismay as

bridge after bridge was bathed in the green light of disintegrating organic material.

"Centran forces moving into attack position!"

Lord Xal made a face and swiped a hand through the air. "This plan is a bust, pull out the..."

"No! Wait, look!" Ahri gestured wildly to one of the images being projected. "Enlarge viewing screen of the *Swift Vengeance*!"

"Enlarging."

The gathered members of the Tribe seemed to suck in a breath in unison when they realized that the crates were still full of intact, living organisms.

"What shielding were we using on the *Swift Vengeance*'s crates?" Lord Xal snapped at the operator.

"Checking...Electromagnetic shielding, sir. Judging by frequency and amplitude of the energy-readings, it had the Class A variant. One of the strongest EM shielding in existence."

"Send in the third wave," Kaara directed. "Match their shield-frequencies and amplitude to the type employed on the *Swift Vengeance*."

"First wave of frigates have engaged Centran skirmishers and shuttles."

"They expected the ships to be sitting nerfs," the Sith Master said with a barking laughter.

"That's not the important part," Ahri voiced, growing alarm in his voice.

"Saber Raas?" The Sith Master growled dangerously.

Kaara raised an eyebrow when Vestara stepped up and whispered rapidly in her ear. She then inclined her head, as if considering whatever it was the disgraced Saber had said. Finally, she glanced to the Sith Master.

"Master Rivas, you again show your inexperience and ineptitude. Once the Centrants realize our ships are not helpless, they will

respond in force. Look at the sensor reading our fleet is picking up. Those are Star Destroyers they have in reserve. Three of those five are more advanced than the one we have. If employed against the forces of the Tribe, the damage they will inflict will be catastrophic."

"Next to the power of the Force..."

"I did not see the Force assisting you in the solution *I* devised," Kaara all but taunted the Keshiri Sith Master.

Any further argument was forestalled as the third wave of ships entered the 'danger zone'. The result was immediate and obvious when all organic material onboard the vessels remained intact.

"We have our answer," Kaara said, the smugness in her normally empty voice not missed by all. "Lord Xal, I will expect my own command and promotion shortly."

"We haven't taken the planet yet."

"Now that the Tribe knows how to protect ourselves against this green death, that should not be a problem," Kaara returned. "Your problem is finding a way to protect ourselves against the green death *and* enemy turbolaser and missile-fire. The electromagnetic shielding needed is useless against anything else, yet requires too much power to maintain a separate shield."

"That just means the Centrans are equally defenseless," Lord Xal said dismissively. "We will both be on even footing. Your contribution to the Tribe has been noted, Saber Kaara."

"For the Tribe," Kaara tilted her head slightly.

"Return to Erilnar. We will call upon you if you are needed a..."

"Lord Xal," Vestara spoke up hastily, earning surprised looks all around.

"Saber Kaara, control your slave."

"Speak," Kaara said instead.

"Analyzing the data from the Tribe's attacks, even on this current mission, the Centran cruisers and heavy-attack vessels did not stray further than thirty-thousand kilometers from Renatasia Four."

"Your point?" Lord Xal growled.

Kaara, however, quickly understood the tactical importance of that. "Modern day technology allows planetary shields to be extended out to high orbit using the planet's own magnetic field to assist. Thirty-thousand kilometers is Renatasia's high orbit ceiling. What my slave is suggesting is that the Centran forces have no need to project electromagnetic defenses of their own if they are relying on a planetary shield generator to do it for them."

"They have to have some way to protect their planet from that flame, Master," Ahri voiced, showing that despite his obsession with Vestara, he too had a keen mind. "While our ships will be going in using the EM shielding to keep the green flame at bay, the Centran forces will have regular shielding and be well defended."

"The forces of the Tribe won't be," one of the other Sabers present gasped.

"Do you still require I return to Erlinar?" Kaara asked mildly.

Lord Xal looked as if he had eaten a very sour fruit. "Like I said earlier, we have not taken the planet yet. You will spearhead the attack on Renatasia. I will assign you to one of our frigates where you will advise the captain on any plan of attack."

"I await your command," Kaara answered back.

"Go, I will inform High Lord Taalon of our situation."

DL-VI-DL

"This is ridiculous!" Ahri Raas' protest sounded loudly in the hangar, stabbing a finger at Kaara and Vestara. "Saber Kaara has no need of her slave onboard a frigate in the middle of a battle. She has her ship and her promotion is all but guaranteed. I say she should hand over that slave right now!"

Lord Xal, very obviously wanting *something* to go his way, nodded agreeably. "Indeed, Saber Kaara. She will have no use to you, might even betray you in the heat of battle. It will be better off if you leave Khai here."

"A wager before we go into battle then," Saber Kaara said tonelessly.

"A wager?"

"Your apprentice versus my slave," Kaara gestured uncaringly to the younger woman at her side. "If he bests her, he can have her."

"What's the catch?"

"None."

"And if she should win?"

"You believe your apprentice will lose to a mere slave?" Kaara asked. As the ambitious blond woman kept to the game plan, Vestara fought hard to keep a smug grin from appearing either on her face or in the Force.

"Of course not, such a thing would be ridiculous," Lord Xal was joined by the others in laughing almost uproariously.

"Then you would not mind raising the stakes on your end then?"

"What?"

"Should my slave defeat your apprentice, not until will she remain at my side, but you will grant me command of the entire battle-group attacking Renatasia and you will enable me to do so from this ship."

"That's....maybe your promotion to Sith Master is premature," Lord Xal scowled. "No slave is worth a cruiser, not by a long shot."

"Oh, you were certain your apprentice would be victorious. What do you have to fear?"

"Fine, I'll agree only on the condition that you will become *my* slave when your pet loses."

"Agreed. Everyone has heard the terms," Kaara addressed the growing crowd. "My slave against your apprentice. Your apprentice wins, he gets my slave and Lord Xal gets me. My slave wins, I gain command of the attack force and this vessel."

Lord Xal seemed to realize just how large the crowd had grown and scowled. "Get on with it then."

Vestara took a step forward only to have Kaara grab her arm in a bruising grip. "You lose and I will kill you myself."

"I think Lord Xal is telling Ahri the exact same thing," Vestara snorted under her breath.

Kaara undid Vestara's collar and handed her a lightsaber. Vestara, however, declined the weapon and stepped into an impromptu fighting ring made up of her fellow Tribe members. "I have a better idea."

"This is going to be all too easy," Ahri smirked, bouncing on the balls of his feet as he took in the rag-covered, beaten-looking appearance of his former sparring partner. He drew his lightsaber and the red light of his blade reflected off the silver lining of his robes.

"A year makes quite a difference, Ahri, does it not?" Vestara tiskied, cricking her neck left and right as she shook out her arms.

"Know your place, slave. I am a Saber of the Lost Tribe of the Sith." And Ahri lunged forward in a motion only other Force-sensitives would have been able to keep track of.

Vestara jerked left and right to avoid his saber slashes and then grabbed his wrists and elbowed him in the face. She felt the cartilage of his nose give way and delivered a kick to his chest as he staggered backwards from the unexpected pain. The kick knocked Ahri flat on his rear, leaving him looking completely stunned. The crowd broke out in startled murmurs, with more than a few openly laughing at what had just happened.

"Forgive me, Saber Raas," Vestara deadpanned. "But your face got in the way of my elbow, and when I tried to help you, my foot got caught in your chest."

Anger flared out from the Keshiri Saber as he scrambled to his feet. His eyes briefly darted to his master, and Vestara spared a second to follow that gaze. The Circle Lord was not looking pleased at all.

"Quit fooling around with her and finish her!"

"She just caught me off guard," Ahri growled, resetting his bleeding nose.

This time he came at Vestara with a Force-saber combo. He used the Force to create invisible barriers to pen Vestara into one place, then slashed at her again. Vestara dropped into splits and delivered a bruising punch as Ahri stepped into his lunge. She missed her

target as he angled his leg, her fist grazing the inside of his thigh. In turn, he delivered a retaliatory knee to Vestara's face, knocking her backwards.

She turned her fall into a roll and sprang to her feet. Feeling the coppery taste she was all too familiar with, she inclined her head briefly as she spit out blood. "Nice move."

"Silence, slave," Ahri breathed out, the Force rolling around him. He thrust out a hand and Sith Lightning arced through the air.

Vestara countered with lightning of her own and the two streams met in a hissing clash that sent waves of Force energy and the smell of ozone wafting towards the onlookers. But she was forced to abandon her counter when she heard the snap-hiss of several lightsabers igniting behind her. She rolled out of the way just as three lightsabers controlled by Ahri's will shot towards her like bullets. They held up once they overshot her, and then formed a protective screen in front of the smirking Keshiri.

"As you said, slave. A year makes quite the difference." He thrust his hand out, and the three sabers flashed as they did their best to reduce Vestara into very finely-cut pieces.

Vestara flipped backwards, to the side, leaped into the air, and dodged left and right as the blades whirled and gouged the flooring around her. Using the Force to help time her actions, she snagged one of the ballistic blades and used it to slice the other two sabers to pieces. Doing so cost her precious seconds as Ahri was already charging her once more. His blade skimmed off the side of her purloined weapon and grazed Vestara's forearm.

Channeling the pain into her anger and strength, Vestara head-butted Ahri and left him with a similar burn on the outside of his opposite leg.

Both staggered backwards, recovering from the brief, taxing encounter.

Ahri made a show of gazing at his burnt leg, and then slowly looking at Vestara with a furious mien. "That's it, you're dead."

"Same old Ahri," Vestara returned in a tauntingly, bored manner. She worked the hand of her burnt forearm and winced as the charred muscles and tendons limited motion. She switched the saber to her off-hand and shook out her wounded one. "Never truly

knowing what he wants. Always content to ride to ride the robes of someone better than him to the top."

Ahri slashed at Vestara again, and the brown-haired Saber blocked each strike, returning a few of her own. The ring of observers had fallen deathly quiet as they steadily began to realize that the match would not be as one-sided as they thought. Even Lord Xal's face had become durasteel-like in its expressiveness, hostility and murder promised should things not go his way.

Vestara whirled around and Ahri's lightsaber flashed, severing a good length of her flowing brown hair. Vestara saw just how much had been cut away float to the ground and had to reach back to confirm that her mid-back-length hair had been reduced to just over her shoulders.

Now it was Ahri's turn to smirk smugly. A smirk that turned into a wide-eyed gasp when Vestara bowled him over with a rush of Force energy. In an exchange that lasted only a few seconds, the two exchanged a barrage of Force attacks.

Even as Ahri flew backwards, he made gestures of his own, and odds and ends in the hangar began zooming towards Vestara like a hailstorm. A hydrosponder, a small cargo crate, a toolbox, all zipped towards the brunette at breakneck speeds. Vestara once again began flipping and twisting to avoid the projectiles, using telekinesis only to pull Ahri back towards her as if he had reached the end of his tether.

Ahri was forced to send the rest of the objects flying back or risk bombarding himself. And he had more pressing issues to worry about as his mid-air momentum had him on course for Vestara's lightsaber. Using both hands this time, he sent a storm of lightning at Vestara. Vestara was forced to angle her saber to deflect the intense influx of energy, and then called upon her own reserves to send it flying right back.

Ahri's face bulged as the full barrage that he had been sending arched right back towards him. He frantically canceled out his lightning and tried to twist away, but it was too late. His forward momentum, and surplus of energy that Vestara was now dealing with worked in tandem to bring the Keshiri Tribe member into the full brunt of his own attack.

Ahri fell to the ground screaming as his hate-filled attack ate away at him, jagged purple arcs of lightning racing up and down his

form. Vestara didn't lower her saber until the last of the attack was channeled away and back into its twitching caster. When the bright purple light finally died away, the only sound in the hangar was Ahri's ragged, raspy breathing and groans of pain.

Saber Kaara broke the silence by stepping forward. "Lord Xal, I thank you for your ship and command of the..."

"My apprentice still lives," Lord Xal growled darkly. "This fight is not over."

"He cannot fight any more in his condition," Vestara returned darkly. "Do you truly wish to throw away one of the Tribe's fighters to soothe your ego?"

Lord Xal held up his hands and slammed Vestara's battle-tired figure into the shuttle behind her. The air was forced from her lungs upon impact and she definitely saw stars. When Lord Xal began to slowly ball his fists as if smashing what was inside of them, Vestara couldn't help but cry out in agony. Force Crushes really did hurt after all. It was probably from that momentary delirium caused by pain and lack of oxygen, but Vestara could swear that she saw Kaara's lightsaber flash twice. The first removed Lord Xal's outstretched arms. The second, his head.

Vestara collapsed unceremoniously on the ground, her vision swimming. She saw Kaara approach the downed Ahri and Vestara managed to make her throat work.

"Don't kill him."

Kaara looked over her shoulder at Vestara, exasperation clear in her eyes. "Why?"

"Good question," Vestara coughed up blood, wincing as fractured ribs protested that movement. "He's an idiot, but a capable soldier. Why waste that?"

"Point." Kaara looked at Ahri with all the interest of a giant staring down a bug. She then looked to several others nearby. "Take Saber Raas and my slave to the med-bay. I have an offensive to lead."

DL-VII-DL

Such was the traditions of the Tribe that no one questioned a mere Saber taking over one of the Tribe's flagship vessels after murdering

its previous commander. The bet had been made, the fight interrupted, the price paid. Even the Sith Masters and more senior sabers onboard deferred to Kaara's leadership for the time being. Willing to give this unorthodox Saber enough rope to hang herself so that they could be next in line to command the most advanced warship in the fleet.

She definitely had her work cut out for her. The Centrans still had a sizable fleet at their disposal, with ships larger and even more advanced than the Tribe's *Victory I*-class Star Destroyer. Added to the danger was the fact that all the Tribe's ships had to run with electromagnetic shielding instead of standard defenses, leaving them completely vulnerable to ion energy, laser bolts, plasma shards, and projectiles. Again, technology worked against them. The more advanced Centran ships had close to a several thousand-kilometer advantage when it came to weapon's range. Not only were they protected by the planetary shield, but they could also shoot at the Tribe's ships before the Tribe's ships were able to enter their own minimum firing range.

Standard Tribe tactics would have been to send in their fleet en masse, knowing that enough would eventually overwhelm the defenders. Especially since every ship commander in the Tribe's fleet could use the Force. But there was trusting the Force, and there was being stupid about it. The previous two attempts to take the system had revealed the obvious deficiency in that strategy.

Though Kaara and Vestara had discussed possible plans of action in the privacy of the former's quarters, each of those plans had a flaw. One might win, but sacrifice too many ships, another might get too many of the Tribe killed. The Tribe couldn't afford to have any costly victories so early in their return to the galaxy, and too many lives had been lost already.

The door to the bridge whooshed open, and Kaara only acknowledged the arrival of Vestara and Ahri with a curt nod. Both were swathed in bandages, preferring to heal the old-fashioned way with the Force and time, than bacta. If there was one thing members of the Tribe hated, it was being helpless. And floating in a vat of goo for anyone to see definitely qualified. They took position on opposite sides of the holo-table, neither paying the other any attention. It was definitely awkward, but with a near impossible task at hand, no one paid it a second glance.

"Centran's are prepared for us. They're in three different battle-groups," Vestara noted the read-out. "A Star Destroyer leading each

group."

"Four battle-groups," Ahri stabbed a finger at a smaller cluster of red triangles. "They have their fighters separate from the rest for some reason."

"Where did the other two Star Destroyers go?" Another tactician asked with a frown.

A second gestured to the whole group. "Those we do see are still maintaining position inside the planetary shield. Even the fighters."

"Zoom in on those Star Destroyers," Vestara motioned. "There's something off about them."

A three-dimensional image of one of the Star Destroyers replaced the battlefield.

"They're Interdictor-class," Vestara frowned. "See those four large chambers, they're supposed to hold gravity-well generators."

"Then they're not combat-type ships and we were worried for nothing?" Another tactician asked.

"Something's not right," Ahri negated that. "Why deploy Interdictors inside a planet's gravity field, it completely cancels its ability out."

Saber Kaara chose that moment to approach the holo-table, and those present clasped a fist to their chests and bowed their heads.

"Saber Kaara."

"Report," the blonde-haired Sith said with no emotion.

"The Centrans are arrayed in battle formation but appear to be waiting for us to make the first move," the Sith Master at the table relayed. He was different from the one that had sat during the exploratory attack earlier, his predecessor demoted to one of the frigates by the recently deceased Lord Xal. "Your slave has indicated that three of the Star Destroyers they have are not combat-type, but instead interdictors. Those facts, combined with the mysterious green fire, indicate that the Centrans still have a few more tricks up their robes."

"Saber Raas, recommendation?"

"Renatasia Four has two moons, both outside the range of the planetary shield generator. We can use them to leap-frog our way to the planet. Once we pass through the planet's magnetic field, we'll be on equal footing with the Centran ships relying on the planetary shielding to keep the green flame away. We can switch to normal shielding then and force them to battle us in high orbit or lower."

"Slave?"

"Mistress, the main drawback to Saber Raas' plan is if the Centrans have their two reserve Star Destroyers behind those moons. Additionally, I am still uneasy about them having Interdictors in a place where there shouldn't be any. It is highly like those Interdictors were re-appropriated for some other use."

"Understood. Tech-officer. Signal the droid frigates One through Five. Direct them towards the larger moon."

"Signal sent."

"Direct droid frigates Six through Ten towards the Centran fleet group on the left flank," Kaara continued, her cold blue eyes analytically going over the read-out. "Have Captain Syndor take his group and target the right flank."

"Acknowledged. Captain Syndor is complying."

The tacticians watched the holo-readout with baited breath. As the ships passed through the kill-zone occupied by the green flame, the Centran forces began to shift position. Since it was clear the Tribe were still in full control of their ships, the Centrans had obviously realized that that particular defense had failed.

"Centran Fleet Group One moving to intercept droid frigate force. Fleet Group Three moving to intercept Captain Syndor's group. Two is staying on station. All three taskforces have not yet left the envelope of the planetary shield. Frigates One through Five are twelve minutes out from the designated moon, nothing appearing on scanners."

"Have frigates Six through Ten merge with Captain Syndor's group. Target Centran Group One."

"Ma'am, Centran Group Three is leaving the planetary shield! Correction, Groups Two and Three are leaving the planetary shield."

"Slave, your analysis?"

Vestara worried her lower lip and shook her head slowly. "I don't know what they're up to, Saber Kaara. But if they're trying to set up for a slugging match, they outnumber Syndor's group greatly."

"Direct Captain Dei's group to reinforce Syndor. Saber Raas, anything to add?"

"No, Saber Kaara. But to prevent the green flame from affecting them, they must also be using an EM variety. Their ships are every bit as vulnerable as our own."

"Saber Kaara! The frigate force we sent to the moon is under attack! Three of them have been destroyed already. There are lunar-based cannons and another group of Centran vessels."

"Instruct the last two to immolate themselves against the largest threat if possible."

Vestara heard a plethora of overlapping reports in the background, but focused as best she could on the fast-approaching elements of both fleets. Even with Captain Dei's reinforcements, the two Centran fleet groups still had the Star Destroyer-like interdictors. She needed a solution and fast if she wanted to preserve Kaara's standing amongst those on the bridge. She briefly wondered if she should try to contact Ship and get its advice on the matter, but just that mere thought sparked another.

"Mistress," Vestara gasped, her hands flying across the control console in front of her.

"Slave?"

"Mistress, the Interdictors, they're not interdictors at all," Vestara used the latest sensor telemetry to bring up a more detailed picture of the ships.

"Those are gravity well generators," one of the other analysts objected.

"We're only made to think that," Vestara shook her head. She tapped a button to highlight a feature on one of the ships. "Look at the energy output! It's generating nearly a hundred-times the required energy needed to power and shield itself. Now look at the EM fields around it."

There were startled gasps. The display showed a very large bubble of energy encompassing several-dozen kilometers of space. And within that bubble were the other Centran ships.

"It's a shield-ship," Ahri summed up in shock. He shook himself as the implications dawned on him "Saber Kaara, pull our people back! Their shields are still combat-capable!"

"Right," Vestara nodded. "Those giant orbs on the Star Destroyers are not gravity wells but power-generators to project a moving field of EM energy."

"If we were to destroy those ships, the crews of the Centran forces will be victims of the green fire then," another analyst voiced. "We should focus all fire on those vessels, regardless of the cost. All we need to do is take them out. We can then capture the Centran vessels just as they did ours earlier."

"Do it," Kaara ordered. "Direct droid frigate Seven and Nine head for Centran shield-ship labeled zero-one. Have Six and Eight head for the same ship, opposite flank. Orders are to immolate themselves into the bridge or generator well. All forces cover the droid frigates."

Though the frigates were barely a fifth the size of the shield-ships, they were armed to the teeth and very maneuverable. Once the Centran forces realized the very suicidal strategy, it was they who became desperate. They hadn't realized that not all Tribe forces had living crews, nor had they realized that the Tribe was willing to trade off a couple of frigates in exchange for the Centran forces engaging them. Defensive turbolaser fire, missiles, and starfighter power plowed into the charging Tribe vessels. Without conventional shields, even the weakest laser hits left deep furrows in the armor plating.

"Second-in-command Leeha Faal reports Captain Syndor has been incapacitated by that last broadside. *Winged Dagger* has sustained heavy damage and is pulling back."

"Droid frigate Nine was just destroyed. It was unable to collide with the shield-ship."

"We've lost all of fighter-squadron One-Three-Zero, Two-Five-One. Fighter squadrons Four-Two-Two and Three-Nine-Five are operating below fifty percent."

"Shield-ship zero-two is moving to cover shield-ship zero-one."

A bright flare went up in the middle of the battlefield.

"Droid frigate Seven has successfully collided with shield-ship zero-one, aft, port-side generator. Power readings fluctuating."

Twin explosions followed, and then another. Reports rapidly filled the bridge.

"Droid frigate Six has been destroyed. Droid frigate Eight has hit zero-one's forward, starboard generator. Fighter squadron Four-Two-Two has successfully eliminated the starboard aft generator.

"Detecting overload occurring within zero-one. It's being contained but they are losing power."

"EM field generated by zero-one is failing. Zero-two is picking up the slack."

"Captain Dei reports his frigate is disabled, all remaining power is being used to generate an EM field."

"Send in hunting packs three and four," Kaara ordered. "Same directions as before. Take out that second shield-ship."

"Centran forces are withdrawing."

"Jump us in," Kaara said coolly. "They will not escape us."

The *Victory*-class Star Destroyer might have been outclassed in the age of *Turbulent* and *Rejuvenator*-class Star Destroyers, but it was still a formidable ship in its own right. Especially since the Centran's were scattered and panicking as one of their shield-ships was on the verge of failing. The micro-jump Kaara ordered placed that Star Destroyer directly on top of the two fleeing shield-ships.

"All weapons, fire."

A hail of green pounded the triangular vessels, completely blowing apart the first ship and turning the shields of the second shield-ship into an opaque bubble. The rest of the Centran forces tried to swarm, but Kaara had jumped the rest of the Tribe's attacking armada into the fray and screened them from defending their lifelines. Though the Tribe's vessels were unshielded and took a pounding, they were also relentless in pursuit of their goal.

When the second shield-ship was ripped in two by the lethal barrage, every Force-sensitive in the fleet felt the mass loss of life flare up all around them. Like fireworks, the green flame immediately penetrated the unshielded Centran vessels and burned up their crews from the inside.

It was over in a matter of seconds, the majority of the Centran attack force completely adrift amid the might of the Tribe.

"Send salvage teams to recover the Centran vessels. They have some of ours, so now we have some of theirs."

"Damage reports coming in. Decks five through ten have hull breaches, emergency bulkheads holding. We've lost the port-side bridge shield-generator. Starboard side generator heavily damaged. Hangar bay received a direct hit from a Centran torpedo, casualty list being made now."

"We're down a wing of fighter-craft, seven gunboats. Not counting the frigates we ordered to immolate themselves, we've lost a dozen other frigates in the battle."

"And the enemy?"

"Shield-ship zero-three and the escorting force are holding position. Still scanning for the missing Star Destroyers."

"I want sensors to get me the location of the planetary shield-generator," Kaara ordered. "Launch probes if you have to. At the same time, broadcast open-comm an opportunity to surrender, and a reward for those who do. Once the people of Renatasia realize the futility of their resistance, as well as the consequences of resisting any further, their fate will be in their hands."

"Scanning shield-dome for focal points."

"Broadcasting to Renatasia as well."

"Saber Raas, slave, your opinions?"

"They won't surrender as long as their two Star Destroyers are in play. I don't know what they're planning, but if those Star Destroyers had attacked in union with the shield-ships, we would have been easily defeated," Ahri voiced.

Vestara nodded along in agreement, closing her eyes and stretching

her senses towards the stars. She felt the usual danger of war, the ever-present warning in the Force that the green flames surrounding them could kill her in seconds. But she also felt something else. She frowned, blinking wildly at the unexpected contact.

"Impossible," she whispered, her eyes flying wide open. She recovered quickly, spinning around towards Kaara. "Pull our people back! It's a trap!"

"Wha..."

The dozens of Centran ships floating all around them suddenly lit up in a string of devastating explosions. The Tribe salvage crews just reaching them never stood a chance. Smaller Tribe vessels, fighters, gunboats, and lighter frigates securing the crewless hulks were caught in blasts much more powerful than they were naturally supposed to be. Spinning shrapnel tore through other vessels, some even embedding themselves into the Tribe's Star Destroyer. Alarms blared throughout the Star Destroyer and added to the chaos.

Before anyone could recover their wits, the two missing Centran Star Destroyers, as well as a supporting force of their own, leaped in. Their guns immediately began blazing, no doubt seeking retribution for their fellow Centrants. Unshielded, the Tribe vessels were forced to rely on the Force to maneuver out of the way. But there was no way they could maneuver forever.

Vestara looked sharply to Kaara. "Come about point five. Set course for Renatasia and perform a micro-jump to just above its shield. Prepare to target any planetary defenses."

"That would place us between their Star Destroyers and their planetary guns," Ahri objected in disbelief.

Kaara held Vestara's gaze for a fraction of a second. In that fraction, their single gaze shared paragraphs of information. "Helm, broadcast to the others. Make the jump. Follow any further direction from my slave."

"Aye, Saber Kaara."

The Tribe's fleet leaped as one organism, arriving right on top of the Centran stronghold planet. The lunar garrison deployed immediately, the same force that had destroyed the earlier probing attack, streaming towards the trapped Tribe fleet.

Vestara stormed over to the comm-section of the bridge. "Give me the comm, *now*."

Bewildered, the technician nodded and quickly backed away.

"Centran forces, this is Saber Vestara Khai of the Lost Tribe of the Sith. You will cease all hostilities or we will destroy the shield bunkers generating the EM field protecting this planet. Test us at your own peril. We have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Stand down and become the first in what will be many vassals to the Sith Empire Reborn. I highly suggest you accept this most generous offer."

"Lunar garrison still on approach. They'll be in firing range in five minutes," the sensor operator called out.

"Centran Star Destroyers performing micro-leap, they are on pursuit course."

"Direct all available droid-frigates to begin immolation phase, target the following coordinates. Have all turbolaser batteries begin firing on the planetary shield on the same coordinates," Vestara ordered, before storming over to the sensor station. She no longer cared about her 'defeated' ruse. This was a matter of life and death. The power games could wait later.

"Immolation phase and turbolaser-bombardment commencing. Planetary cannons are acquiring target locks. Centran lunar and Star Destroyer taskforce will be in firing range in less than a minute."

"Continue the attack," Vestara growled almost sub-vocally. From the sensor readout, the fleet-bombardment had weakened the planetary shield just enough for the droid-controlled frigates to stream through. Planetary batteries were firing, but so were the frigates. Multiple explosions were dotting the surface of the planet.

"EM field is weakening," another technician reported.

"Centran forces in firing range!"

A volley of turbolasers and missiles were launched, ravaging the nearest Tribe vessels.

"Hold your ground," Vestara ordered. "Have all available fighters from squadrons One-Three-One to One-Four-Three perform a

screen."

"We're going to lose more ships than before at this rate!" Ahri said incredulously, storming across the bridge towards her. "The Centrans are not pulling back!"

"EM field is failing in parts of the northern hemisphe..." The sensor operator fell silent as a part of the planet they were staring at was suddenly lit up in bright green. The flare lasted for a few very long minutes, and when it died off, a large part of the northern hemisphere where a forested cityscape had once been was a black and brown swath of dead land. The entirety of the Tribe attacking fleet had felt thousands of lives flash out as the green flame rippled through the exposed areas of the planet.

"Continue fire on the other power generators," Vestara said tonelessly.

"Receiving communication's from the planet. The local governors transmitting surrender to the 'opposing commander'!"

"Centran fleet is still attacking," the comm-officer reported.

"The *Dark Blade* has sustained heavy damage. If we do not pull back now, we will not be able to stay out of Renatasia's gravity field."

Vestara moved back to the comm and toggled the open-channel once more. "The deaths of the rest of the people on the planet are in your hands then. I truly hope none of you have family left in the remaining regions. Renatasia Command, Lunar Garrison Command, what will victory mean if you lose the lives of the billions on the planet to destroy a fleet already ravaging your power generators? Convince the fleet to surrender and all Centran lives will be spared. You will join the Tribe and have the honor of being a corner stone in an empire that will span many many star systems. Together we will rise up out of this corner of space and leave our mark on the galaxy."

The Centran fleet continued to fire for a few more seconds, before their guns began to go silent one by one. An uneasy stillness filled the bridge and the vacuum outside it, the Centran ships moving into formation with the lunar garrison.

And then a voice crackled over the comm, filling the bridge.

"*This is acting Commander Ludoc of the Centran Naval Armada to*

Saber Vestara Khai. We acknowledge your message and will stand down. Repeat, the vessels of the Centran Defense Force and the planetary forces of Renatasia will cease hostilities and surrender to you and your forces. I hope you are honorable and keep your word. We have no desire to see our families burn."

"Naturally," Vestara answered back, doing her best to keep a confident smirk from appearing on her face. "As you are now members of the Tribe and our growing empire, we have no desire to see your families burn either. All ship commanders and pilots will be allowed to retain their commissions and ranks. Those of the Tribe look forward to the day that Centran and Tribe forces venture out as allies, bringing stability and peace to our new empire."

Vestara signed off and then paused. She could feel a myriad of gazes boring holes into the back of her figure, could feel hostility, confusion, realization, and a whole host of emotions bouncing freely as the threat of imminent destruction abated. She didn't really blame them. Though they had lost nearly three-quarters of the forces assigned to them, they now had two shiny Star Destroyers and the much more advanced ships of the Centran navy to replace them...And there was the fact that the acting commander and planet had surrendered to *her*. Yeah...that was going to go over well.

She turned around, dark-eyed gaze searching the near-silent bridge. It didn't take a Jedi to know that they were wondering what she was going to do next.

"Comm," Vestara said slowly. "Inform High Lord Taalon that the last of the Centran resistance has been pacified. Ask where he would like us to dispatch his new Star Destroyers."

"Y...es...Saber Khai," the comm-operator said faintly.

"Give Saber Kaara all the credit," Vestara added as if in afterthought. "It was her fleet, her foresight and adaptability. I'd be dead if it wasn't for her. Do the Sith Masters here agree?"

The Sith Masters on the bridge all stared at Vestara, as if trying to discern the game she was now playing. One by one, they each nodded.

"Let the records show a unanimous agreement among the ranking Sith Masters onboard with regards to Saber Kaara's success. Hopefully this will go towards her promotion as well. Let High Lord

Taalon have those records too."

"Understood," the comm-operator swallowed, not wanting to do anything with the powerplay unfolding.

"Saber Kaara," Vestara stepped forward and bowed on hands and knees before her. "Congratulations on your victory."

"My' victory?"

"I live to serve the Tribe. You are the leading representative of the Tribe," Vestara worded carefully. "My victories are yours, my failures are my life."

"Rise. You...are dismissed," Kaara said stiffly.

"For the Tribe," Vestara clasped a hand over her chest, bowed her head, and then hastily exited the bridge. As the doors slid shut behind her, she couldn't stop the full-fledged grin she had been holding back from making an appearance. The grin disappeared as quickly as it appeared and she quickly clamped down on her emotions. Rubbing a victory in, though definitely in line with Tribe policies, probably wasn't the best idea. Though she had helped pacify the last organized Centran resistance, it was the 'after the end' stuff she now needed to worry about.

For one, who was the Tribe going to target next?

And for two, just how in blazes was she now going to get herself out of the latest hole her victory had dug her? Make no mistake, though she was giving credit to Kaara, pretty much everyone in the fleet had heard the open-broadcast made by the Centran Navy and the government of Renatasia.

The truth could be damned inconvenient.

Maybe she should have just ignored that Jedi's advice and actually defeated Kaara in the Kaggath. It would have saved her a lot of headaches...or maybe just created a few more. Who knew that making allies in a culture where backstabbing was the norm would be so hard? What was the more 'Sith' thing to do?

She closed her eyes, opening up her link to Ship. The moment she did, she felt an icy coolness suffuse her body and mind. It was a sensation she recognized and she quickly slammed her techForce barriers back up.

*I am **not** your puppet, Ship.*

So you believe yourself the puppet-master then? The thoughts carried with it a hint of derision and anger.

You exist to serve the Sith. You are a tool, no more. Like a blaster or lightsaber. You will serve your purpose.

Tell me then, little Sith, why do you deign to grace me with your presence?

Centrality has been subjugated.

Would you like an award for that? Had you allowed me to guide you, this could have been wrapped up far sooner. The Jedi's ideals have made you weak.

Your ideals would have gotten me killed. It was the Jedi's ideals that kept me alive.

***My** ideals, as you say, would have tested you, molded you into the person the Sith Empire needs to be. Instead you opt to put your life in the hands of others. Of not making the future **you** want, but one where the others will force you to accept their ideas. You weakened yourself, something no Sith would ever do on purpose. You spared lives that would serve no purpose in our Empire but to take up space and plot against you. The Sith way...*

Got the Sith killed, had us revert to a Rule of Two and hide and skulk. It did not work.

You did not answer my previous question, little Sith. Are you the puppet-master now? Have you mastered what it means to be Sith? Understand the collective knowledge of Marka Ragnos, Tulak Hord, and the other greats who lived in the golden years of the Sith Empire?

No.

Then you will...

I do not need them.

Tread carefully.

Ragnos, Hord, Kresh, they are all long dead. Their empires disintegrated because they believed in sharing power with no one. If you are trying to

*teach me to act as they do, to preserve the 'pure' Sith teachings, then I have no interest. What you **will** instruct me on is the secrets they unlocked. The strategies they used in battle. You have helped me realize that for too long I have relied on what others see as 'Sith' behavior. But the true Sith have been dead for millennia. We are just pale echoes repeating words and practices of a people who have died out long ago. If we want to build an Empire that will outlast the ones of Ragnos and the like, then we will need to redefine what it means to be Sith. I will need to redefine what a Sith is in my own mind. If it means taking sensible advice of a Jedi, then so be it. I will simply use their knowledge to reinforce weaknesses in our doctrine so that our people will be even stronger.*

Good. Good.

Ship?

You have passed the final test, little Sith. You have realized the truth about the Sith and the Empires of lore. You cannot mimic what has failed. You must make the Sith reborn and relevant in this day and age. I have no more instruction that you would accept. No more advice that you would find palatable.

What does that mean?

It means, Vestara Khai of the Lost Tribe of the Sith, that you are now on your own. I will depart now for other factions of Sith in the galaxy. Perhaps they will be more amenable to the teachings that were programmed into me thousands of years ago. You, I wish the best. But know that as you are now, the empire you wish to build will not be a Sith Empire, but something different.

Better?

That remains to be seen. Be warned, if my next pupil is deserving of my teachings, they will do everything in their power to destroy that dream of yours.

The sentient meditation sphere broke off its link with Vestara, sending the teenage Sith staggering as if her legs had just been knocked out from under her. She braced herself against the bulkhead wall and not for the first time cursed her position.

"Great," Vestara grimaced, realizing she had bit her lip after tasting her own blood. She tugged at the slave-collar around her neck as she took in a deep breath. As she did, the code she had lived her life

by echoed through her mind and she mouthed it almost inaudibly. "Through passion I gain strength. Only through victory will my chains be broken."

"You had your victory."

Vestara closed her eyes at Kaara's voice. Couldn't the Force have put off this conversation for another day...or forever? "Saber Kaara. Mistress if you prefer."

"Are you a danger to me?"

Several glib responses came to mind, her exhaustion adding to her giant, throbbing headache. Ultimately, though, sense won out. When talking with Vran and Kaara, humor was only useful in getting them angry.

"No."

She felt Kaara absorb the truth of that single word. "Why?"

"An empire cannot be built on the back of a single person," Vestara said wearily, turning towards the older woman. Explaining something that seemed so obvious to her tugged at those last strings of patience she possessed. "You know that the Grand Lord and High Lord Taalon have designs on ruling this galaxy, will make power-plays along with many of the Circle to become that ruler of our new Sith Empire. And just like in the past, those games will be our downfall."

"And the leader should be you?"

"No," Vestara shook her head. "Saber Kaara. Every Sith in the Circle of Lords surrounds themselves with sycophants, those that debase themselves before the Circle Lord for table-scraps of power. Most of them would jab their parang in the back of that same lord or lady if it meant their own advancement. We have to break that cycle. To build our new empire on a tradition where the bonds between Sith are strong enough to endure anything the galaxy throws at us. I've already placed my life in your hands, Saber Kaara, and I will continue to do so. It all comes down to what type of empire *you* want as well."

Kaara stared impassively at Vestara for several long seconds, her face as blank as her shielded thoughts. Vestara held her gaze unflinchingly, her chin tilted slightly upwards in defiance. The

seconds ticked by, neither saying a word as their Force presences flared and muted trying to judge the other.

Finally, Kaara simply turned back around and headed back towards the bridge without another word.

Vestara released another breath of relief, bowing her head in silent thanks. Maybe her insane dreams, coupled with the wisdom of her Jedi slave, would bear fruit after all.

DL-Chapter End-DL

A\N: The story is six chapters long. Next update, next week!

4. Chapter 4

Chapter 4

DL-I-DL

Mop up operations in Centrality were left to the less-experienced or more politically connected members of the Tribe. Some saw honor and glory in chasing down the last remnants of resistance, others saw it as a chore that was beneath them. And there were others still who saw this as an opportunity.

Since Vestara had so blatantly taken command of the Tribe's attack force on Renatasia, things had been strained. Everyone *knew* what she had done, but since she wasn't taking credit for it, was insisting it was all done under Kaara's orders, no one quite knew how to react. Kaara left her alone for the most part, and the others seemed content to follow this. It suited Vestara perfectly. The last thing she wanted was to become a 'threat' to High Lord Taalon or the Grand Lord himself. It'd make her life a lot more difficult than she wanted it to be.

The fact that the Meditation Sphere had blasted off to who-knew-where only seemed to work in Vestara's favor. As if its absence was a silent condemnation on Vestara's 'lack of importance' and confirmed Taalon and Vol's beliefs. Though Vestara did miss the Meditation Sphere and its unique insight on current events, she was also slightly relieved that she no longer had to worry about it taking over her mind.

She had other things to concern her.

"You have a problem."

Vestara took in Kaara's statement without emotion. "I do?"

"Your new assignment," Kaara tossed a datapad down next to Vestara's meditative seated position.

"My new assignment?"

"Yes."

Vestara floated the datapad in front of herself and had to do a double-take. "High Lord Taalon wants me to hunt down members of

the Tribe."

"Yes."

"A Lord has decided to abandon his post with his entire staff and training group," Vestara read, eyebrows rising. "Why are we hunting our own now? Have we already run out of enemies in the galaxy?"

"Orders," Kaara said noncommittally.

"Am I allowed to know *why* this Lord abandoned his post, anything else about the situation?"

"That would make it easy," Kaara shook her head. "My brother has received the same orders. He wants command of one of the captured Star Destroyers. He eliminates this group, he gets it."

"And you?"

"I have orders to provide you no assistance. You are a slave, this is a trivial matter."

"Sure, defecting members of the Tribe is trivial," Vestara muttered under her breath.

Kaara hesitated for a moment, before tilting her head slightly. "If I were to provide you assistance, I'd make sure a shuttle with your two Tyros is prepped in the hangar bay. And that it has the latest information as to the whereabouts of the deserters."

Vestara looked sharply to Kaara, eyebrows rising. "That is *if* you were to provide assistance, against the orders of High Lord Taalon."

"Yes," Kaara acknowledged.

"It is a good thing you are a loyal member of the Tribe and would never do such a thing then."

"Very."

"I should be going then," Vestara stood, finding the entire conversation surreal. "I need to prep my shuttle and gather intelligence about this group."

"Yes."

Vestara popped up to her feet and began to pull on her armor set. "Your brother...would he hypothetically have the same information I'd uncover?"

"More than likely."

"Wonderful."

"Saber Khai, you envision a Sith Empire without backstabbing and pettiness. I envision one where both myself and my brother serve it loyally for the rest of our days."

"A noble goal."

"He despises you."

"So did you."

"You are a slave. He'll be within his right to kill you if you get in his way."

"I'll just make sure that doesn't happen then." Vestara slid her *parang* into its sheath and tightened the last of her outfit's buckles.

"Careful, Saber Kaara, it almost sounds like you're worried about me."

Kaara's cold expression dropped a few more degrees. "You are a reflection of my faction. Don't embarrass me too much when you die at his hand."

"Understood. Make sure High Lord Taalon doesn't send you on a suicide mission when I'm gone. I kind of like this bunk."

I-I-I-I-I

"Tyro Airia, Tyro Jesdan," Vestara acknowledged the two as she entered the shuttle.

"Saber Khai." They both clasped a fist to their chest and bowed their head.

"Ready to do things far above your station and most likely get killed in the process?"

"For the Tribe," Jesdan nodded.

"As the Tribe commands," Airia agreed.

"The Tribe commands you stay alive. It's the people that give the orders that rather we didn't," Vestara answered back, her face emotionless. "Report on the situation."

"A datapad full of very helpful information was left on the pilot's seat," Jesdan pointed.

Vestara looked to the cockpit and froze. Sitting in the pilot's seat was one of the last people she expected. "Ahri, what are you doing here?"

"Nice to see you too, Ves," the Keshiri Saber smirked.

"You didn't answer my question."

"Careful, I'm a Saber, you're a slave," Ahri said casually. "I'm here under High Lord Taalon's orders. Can't have a slave running about challenging members of the Tribe, even if they did desert. Think of me as your supervisor."

"I think my saber might malfunction and accidentally find its way into your chest," Vestara remarked darkly. "Enjoy being the ackdog for others?"

"Don't be like that, Ves. If I'm present, Vran can't just arbitrarily kill you. He and I are the same rank, and you and the Tyros here are technically mine for the duration of the mission."

"Are you just inventing new reasons for me to kill you?" Vestara said in exasperation.

"I could mandate a clothing-optional requirement some of the Tribe have for their serving staff."

"Do it and die."

"Touchy," Ahri sighed dramatically. "And here I thought our long-time friendship would help us get this mission done quickly. You do know the name of the Lord we're going after, right?"

"I wasn't told," Vestara said through gritted teeth.

Ahri spun around in his chair, holding the information-packed datapad and pretending to read it. "Ahlarin Dals. In a way, his

desertion is your fault. You killed his beloved son and only heir and the Grand Lord refused to hold you accountable. Then High Lord Dals made a fuss and he fell out of favor. Then decided to fall out of the Tribe altogether."

"Enough," Vestara glowered. She Force-pulled the datapad out of his hand and made sure that any true emotions she was feeling was buried away. The last thing she wanted was to let Ahri know that he was getting to her. "You're the pilot, right? Just set course for where we need to go. The sooner I can be done with this, the better."

"That's set course...Saber Raas," Ahri said airily.

"Airia, Jesdan, let's go, we're getting a new ship," Vestara said to her Tyros, moving back to the boarding ramp.

"Won't be any available," Ahri drawled. "Rest of the vessels are locked down. High Lord Taalon's orders."

Vestara ignored the Keshiri Saber and disembarked. "You two capable of flying fightercraft?"

"We've received basic training," Jesdan nodded.

"Good." Vestara held her hand up towards a trio of fightercraft docked nearby and focused her tech-Force abilities on them. The trio hummed to life and the clamps released them.

"What...how?" Airia gaped.

"Get in one," Vestara directed. "And slave your navi-computer to mine."

The Tyros did as told just as a bewildered Ahri came staggering out of the shuttle. "Saber Khai, what are you doing?"

"My mission," Vestara said darkly. For good measure she Force shoved Ahri back into the shuttle before vaulting into her own fighter. "Tyros are you with me?"

"*We are, Saber Khai.*"

"Prepare to jump to hyperspace."

"*Inside the hangar?*"

"The alternative is forcing Saber Kaara to use her ship's guns on us. Uploading jump coordinates now."

"Received."

"Jump on my mark."

The powering-up of the three fighters as well as their hyperdrive drew attention to the events that were unfolding. The hangar crews, realizing what was about to happen, hurriedly dived for cover or fled the hangar. Ahri, who was re-emerging from the shuttle once more, gaped wide-eyed in terror a second before all three fighters blew out of the hangar at lightspeed. The resulting shockwave sent him flying into the unmoored shuttle and the shuttle flying across the hangar.

DL-II-DL

Vestara took note of her surroundings as she and her two Tyros dropped out of hyperspace. The first set of coordinates Kaara had supplied had led them to a system on the outskirts of Centrality. It was an ancient system well known to the Sith. Yet, in the millennia the Tribe had been away, much had changed.

"So this is the famous Tund system," Vestara murmured. She had read up on it during the hyperspace trip, had learned that the same green fire that had caused the Tribe so much trouble had actually been unleashed on the planet and wiped out all life. A once vibrant, forested world, the spinning globe before her was a barren wasteland, completely inhospitable.

"*Why would they come here?*" Jesdan asked in confusion. "*This planet's dead.*"

"Two-thousand years after we were stranded, the red-skins came and took over the planet. For generations, Tund was a powerful Sith world. The secrets they must have unlocked, their knowledge of the Force...unimaginable. The people may be gone, but artifacts might still be down there. If Ahlarin Dals is able to find a holocron from the old times, he will become an even greater threat."

"*Detecting no other vessels in the...wait...there is one,*" Airia reported dutifully. "*Sensors show a ChaseMaster frigate in decaying orbit over the planet's equator. It's one of ours.*"

"Vran," Vestara said, knowing it to be true as soon as she spoke the

hulking Saber's name. "Keep your distance. Any sign they have detected us?"

"No, Saber Khai."

"Come about the opposite side of the planet, we'll use it to shield us from..."

"Saber Khai, the frigate is displaying no energy signatures. It's how I missed it the first time around," the Keshiri Tyro interrupted. *"It's completely dead."*

"With our luck, Vran would have gotten himself roasted by the green flame," Vestara grumbled to herself. She checked her fighter's limited sensors and aimed it towards the planet. From the distance they were at, she didn't get any useful readings. She thumbed the comm. "Stay alert. A freighter that size has over a crew over a dozen. Can hold a dozen more. If they aren't on the ship, there's a chance they're all planet-side."

"Another vessel just came into range, also in a decaying orbit" Airia added to her report as their fighters continued to approach the desolate planet. *"Light cruiser, last seen in Lord Dals' command. Also dead in space."*

"Bring fighters to full stop," Vestara directed, pulling back on her throttle control.

"Full stop, confirmed."

"Understood, Saber Khai."

Vestara checked her sensors again. They were still too far out to detect life-signs on the planet, but at the same time, whatever had disabled Vran and Lord Dals' ships would probably have little effort doing the same with the fighters they were in. Go closer or pull back and call for support? She immediately dismissed the second option. She highly doubted that there would be any support to be had.

"Set shields double-front. Modulate the second layer to mimic the anti-fire barriers we used to take Renatasia. Engines one-fifth sublight," Vestara ordered. "Be mindful of the Force and be ready to act at a moment's notice."

The trio of fighters hummed back to life, but only just. As they

approached the planet, a more detailed picture began to unfold. The entire planet was stripped of life, but there were areas around the equator protected by the same electro-magnetic shielding the fighters were now using. Their limited sensors couldn't penetrate the ground, but there was obviously something active on the planet's surface. As for the two ships, both bore signs of severe ion scarring, the hulls a seared mess of melted metal plating.

Vestara's fighter chirped, alerting her that another ship was coming out of hyperspace behind them. She checked the readings and groaned. "Force, why do you hate me?"

Still a good distance away was the shuttle she and her Tyros were originally supposed to have taken. She didn't need the sensors to tell her that Ahri Raas was onboard. And if the Force wasn't enough, the open-broadcast from the shuttle kind of gave it away.

"I repeat, stand down and power your fighters off. I have the official authority of High Lord Taalon and I am ordered to take you in."

Vestara turned the comm off, her annoyance spiking. Sensors showed that Ahri was approaching full throttle, not even taking the time to assess the situation.

And then her fighter rocked as a laser bolt from the shuttle stitched her unshielded rear.

Vestara flicked her comm back on. "Ahri, I swear, I will blast your ship to pieces!"

"Surrender Khai!"

Vestara was about to send the trio of fighters into a turning arc to flank the shuttle when her threat-assessment computer squawked once more. She glanced down and saw that it had picked up a powerful discharge of energy coming from the planet's surface.

"No, no, no, no!" Vestara breathed out.

A wash of energy leaped upwards like liquid lance, blue electricity crackling and piercing the three fighters and shuttle.

"Tyros, eject!" Vestara ordered sharply, pulling on her own ejection system.

The cockpit of the fighter separated from the rest of the craft,

explosive bolts propelling her away as the rest of the fighter's systems began to shut down. She was free from the rest of the ship, the only problem was that the wave of electricity had killed all the systems in the cockpit too. Her only fortune was that she had been on course for the planet and that momentum was her ally. She reached out with the Force, finding both her Tyros panicking as they too rocketed on a ballistic course towards the barren world.

With a small huff, she injected confidence and reassurance. Not that she cared about their feelings, but their panic reflected poorly on her, reflected weakness.

Steady yourselves. We will land where the Force wills. Panicking is unbecoming of members of the Tribe.

Her escape pod began to shake violently as it hit the upper layers of Tund's atmosphere, flares of white and orange streaking all around. Without navi-controls or access to the retrorockets, Vestara had no hope of angling the pod to a proper approach vector. Her cockpit began to heat up and fast. All she could do was grit her teeth, hold onto the useless steering yoke in a white-knuckled grip, and wrap the Force around her as best she could.

As her pod was tossed about in re-entry, sound returned in a deafening cacophony of screeching, stressed metals, and whistling wind. G-forces yanked Vestara left and right, her pod's non-aerodynamic nature working against it as its super-heated parts were sheared off by the inertia.

Vestara fought to remain conscious, but it was a losing battle. Even with the Force bolstering her, she could feel herself blacking out as her pod was twisted and flipped end over end.

When she next woke, she could taste her own blood and feel a splitting headache. The smell of melting metal and plasteel made her scrunch her nose in distaste and urged her further into consciousness. Her lashes flickered upwards and she took note of the completely shattered cockpit canopy. And promptly realized how precarious her position was. Her pod had slammed into the side of a towering cliff-face, and if the shimmering at the front end was any indicator, had lodged itself between the rocks and an electromagnetic forcefield. She shifted her weight, the pod shifted further into the field.

As her senses returned, she quickly remembered that said field would be holding back the deadly green flames that snuffed out all

organic life. With a pained yelp, she shifted herself in the opposite direction, and then re-evaluated her situation. Her armored chest-piece had taken the brunt of the impact, probably preventing fatal injuries but not stopping a number of ribs from snapping. Her limbs seemed functional, and apart from an obvious concussion, she could feel the rest of her body as well.

Carefully she climbed through the shattered canopy, the pod teetering one way and then the other as she did. Once she was on her feet, she inhaled, grimaced at the stabbing pain from her ribs, and then launched herself into a Force leap. The extra momentum sent her fighter's cockpit tumbling through the EM field, where the organic components promptly vanished in a flash of green.

She landed on the rocky top of the cliff, promptly coughing up blood as she did. Her injuries annoyed her to no end. Every breath was painful, but that only fueled her anger. Her rage drew the Force through her body, literally forcing her injuries closed and holding her bones in place through sheer will. Unlike a Jedi healing-trance, it was an unnatural jolt that put great stress on her body. But she couldn't afford to be weak. Not with Ahri, Vran, and Ahlarin Dals somewhere on the planet.

Panting, she slowly straightened and surveyed her surroundings. The smoking trails of the two other cockpits were still visible in the otherwise still air. Visually following their paths, she saw that one had landed further in on the mesa she was on. The other appeared to have gone over the edge of the opposite side. She could still feel both of the Tyros in the Force, their life-presences not exactly strong, but in no danger of going out either.

What caught her attention was that during her following of the smoke trails, she saw what looked like a structure standing out in the middle of the mesa. It was made of the same charred stone she was standing on and though it was very far away, it towered over the flattened ground. Its hard edges may have been worn away, but the pyramidal shape of a Sith temple was unmistakable.

And between her and the temple was an array of downed vessels. She had no doubt that among them were the ships Vran's and Ahlarin's people had used to land. But there were way more ships littering the top of the mesa than the Tribe's forces could account for. Glancing back over the edge of the mesa, she could see the remains of many more metal vessels scattered across the landscape.

More complications, great. Vestara forced herself towards the escape-

pod containing her Tyro. From what the Force was telling her, it contained Jesdan. Where the Keshiri Tyro Airia was, she didn't know. In her wounded state, it seemed to take her ages to reach the escape-pod. The sunlight beat down on the barren stone-top, and her heavy battle-armor wasn't making things any cooler. The only upside was that it also increased her anger and continued to empower the dark side healing technique she was employing on her wounds.

She reached the escape-pod and saw that Jesdan was still unconscious inside, a streak of blood matting his unruly golden hair. With an impatient gesture, Vestara sent the shattered canopy flying off the ship.

"Tyro Jesdan, wake up," Vestara surprised herself as her voice came out in a hoarse croak. The trip across the hot mesa had taken more out of her than she thought. *Wake up.*

Stirred by the command of the Force, the young Tyro weakly came to. "Saber Khai?"

"You live," Vestara confirmed, lending the bewildered teen some of her own strength.

"Airia?"

"She lives, but I do not know where she is."

"She is of the Tribe, she will survive," Jesdan exhaled, seemingly half to convince himself.

"Yes," Vestara nodded.

"What of Saber Raas?" Jesdan asked as his memory of his crash came back to him.

"If it was my wish, the fool would have been incinerated by the green flame surrounding this mesa," Vestara said grumpily. "But I still feel him in the Force, so that is not so. I am not sure where he is either."

"Do we continue our mission?"

"Naturally," Vestara tilted her head towards the distant pyramid. "Vran and Ahlarin still live too. I can feel it."

Jesdan weakly clawed his way out of the wreck of his cockpit. He then looked back at the charred mess. "I kind of hoped my first time flying a fightercraft would end differently."

"Ball of fire in service to the Tribe?" Vestara said dryly.

Jesdan snorted. "Triumphant return after slaying a full squadron of enemies."

Vestara did her best not to smile. She remembered her first mission outside of Kesh, how honor and glory had been her goals. Jesdan was not even two years younger than she was. The ground crunched beneath their boots as they headed towards the pyramid. "I remember that dream as well, Tyro."

"Truly, Saber Khai?"

"Is it so hard to imagine that I once also wanted the rewards and recognition slaying the Tribe's enemies would bring?"

"Well...may I speak freely, Saber Khai?"

"I haven't kept you alive this long to strike you down for speaking your mind."

"Saber Khai, you seem the last person to want any recognition among the Tribe. You almost single-handedly took Renatasia, wiped out the rebel forces on Eriinar, brought down the shield-generators, and even brought back the first ships to Kesh. Yet, you allow others to call you slave, to take credit for your work. You might be serving the Tribe, but you do so in a way I have never seen before."

"The Tribe's ways..." Vestara took a moment to select her words carefully. "The Tribe's ways may have worked on Keshiri. One planet, one government, a limited number of people. But in a galaxy where everyone else has bigger guns, ships, and populations that would put Kesh to shame, we need to change our ways. Especially if we wish to rule and bring to this galaxy a proper Sith Empire. If I were to stand out, demand credit where it was due, the Grand Lord and the others would see me a threat."

"Subterfuge," Jesdan caught on. "You are undermining them and they do not even know it."

"They probably suspect. They are not stupid people," Vestara shrugged. "But so long as I do nothing overt against their power,

they are content to let me plot. After all, if they killed everyone in the Tribe with ambition and schemes, there would be no one left."

"Saber Khai, you're bleeding!" Jesdan gestured to a blood trail which Vestara hadn't realized she had been leaving behind.

Vestara grimaced and realized that her rage had masked a piece of metal shrapnel that had embedded itself in her leg just above the knee. She had missed it because the metal shard had gone in deep and blended in with her robes. Unlike her other injuries, the shard had made a mess of the severed blood-vessels, and she couldn't just will the vessels to link up again.

Jesdan removed one of the leather straps of his armor and handed it to the wounded Saber. Vestara nodded thankfully and wrapped her leg up above the wound. She then used the Force to expel the metal shard, gasping in pain as she did. Knowing she would continue to bleed if something wasn't done, she took a trembling hand and activated her lightsaber. She inhaled slowly, and then let out a small cry as she cauterized her wound with the tip of the crimson blade. The lightsaber fell from her grasp at the brief flash of pain.

"Are you...alright?"

"Never better," Vestara panted weakly, calling her saber back into her grip and sheathing it. She undid the leather strap and tested her leg by putting some weight on it. It hurt, but she had felt much worse before. "Crashing into the side of a mesa is not advisable, Tyro."

"I'll try to keep that in mind."

They resumed their trip to the pyramid. A trip that seemed to take ages as the sun beat down on them from above. By the time they grew close enough to see the entrance, the sun was close to setting.

Both were panting, having shed most of their heavy armor and robes in the process. What clothes they did have left was soaked with sweat and blood. But they were of the Tribe, and their will forced them to carry on.

"Evening is falling," Jesdan gasped hoarsely.

"It will not be a relief if that pyramid was built by Sith," Vestara managed, swaying as they took a break. "Sith of old liked to time their tricks for the night. We were made for the shadows after all."

"I will be on my guard," Jesdan breathed out, looking exhausted.

"We should rest before entering, recover our strength," Vestara pointed to one of the more intact ships that had crashed at the temple door-steps. "That should be adequate refuge."

They limped their way into a desert-worn hulk of a ship. It had been a light-frigate at some point, but its browned out hull and numerous holes in said hull indicated a very rough re-entry and landing. A deep furrow in its wake, coupled with a debris trail just as long, made it very unlikely anyone on the ship survived the crash. Both teenage Tribe members settled into what remained of a cargo-hold, temporarily sheltered from the howling dry winds that were whipping across the surface of the mesa.

"Any sign of Saber Vran or Lord Dals' vessels?"

"That is Lord Dals' shuttle," Vestara gestured to another ship. Strangely enough, it appeared to have touched down in one piece, as if it had been spared the disabling tidal wave of energy. "I do not see any evidence of Vran's."

"Think their crews survived too?"

"I don't know," Vestara admitted with a shrug. "We will deal with it when we have to."

"Still no sign of Airia," Jesdan added.

"Tyro, I do not know how you were taught. But generally, restorative meditations are done in silence."

"Sorry, Saber Khai."

"Don't be. Just recover your strength. When day breaks tomorrow, we will do our duty to the Tribe."

DL-III-DL

The daylight shone through the holes in the hull of their refuge and both Tribe members broke their trance and stood in unison. The night had been uneventful outside of the increased howling of the wind. With no natural barriers to stop it, the wind ravaged the planet and swept up all sorts of rocks and debris. The electromagnetic shields did nothing to stop these projectiles, so they pelted and pitted the remains of the pyramid standing tall. In a few

hundred years, there would probably be nothing left of the pyramid.

Centered and ready, Vestara and Jesdan ventured from their cover and resumed their trek towards their goal. Vestara silently pointed towards Ahlarin's shuttle, and Jesdan nodded in understanding. It appeared lifeless, but they both knew the Force could conceal life if one was talented enough. The last thing they wanted was to be flanked by any rear vanguard.

The shuttle ramp was closed, the exterior showing slow wear from the bombardment of rocky fragments carried by the wind. Vestara placed a hand on the ramp access panel and was surprised to see it flicker to life.

"The ship has power," Jesdan blinked in shock.

"They were likely the first ones here," Vestara murmured, keying in an override. "Then Vran's ship arrived and fired on their mothership"

"Just like when Saber Raas fired on us."

"Yes. It's possible it triggered some sort of defense in this temple." Vestara frowned when the override code didn't work. "It is a good thing. It means we have a way off this planet."

"If we can get in," Jesdan said, watching as the override code failed a second time.

Vestara arched an eyebrow at the Tyro, who quickly looked away. She then did what Jesdan least expected, pounded on the closed ramp with a fist. "This is Saber Vestara Khai of the Tribe. By order of High Lord Taalon, open up."

There was a silent pause. The minutes ticked by slowly.

"Maybe no one is inside," Jesdan said hesitantly.

Vestara pounded on the ramp again. "Lord Dals has yet to return, and if you value his life, I would like a status update. I am not here to kill him or bring him back to the Tribe. You have my word, on my family's honor."

More silence. And then, the ramp's hydraulics hissed. Vestara and Jesdan stepped back and let the ramp lower. Inside the shuttle

appeared to be more than a few people, most of them their age.

"Who speaks for you all?" Vestara asked.

The group looked at one and other. Finally one of the older teens stepped forward. Dark hair and skin, his face was gaunt and worn. "I will, I am Tyro Raj Daan. Loyal servant of High Lord Ahlarin Dals."

Vestara took note of the others inside. Two more Force-users, more than likely Tyros given their age, and another five non-Force-users dressed in the silver armor of the Tribe's infantry. "Tyro Daan, I would request a status update."

"Why?" One of the other Tyros blurted out. "So you can then kill us and get to our master?"

"I am the speaker of our group, Tyro Kasus," Tyro Daan snapped. "We all have heard the stories of Saber Khai. She was the one with the loyalty of the Meditation Sphere, not the Grand Lord. She has the power to wrench the landing ramp open and slay us all. She did not. Stay your tongue before *you* get us killed."

"She killed the Master's son!"

"Tyro Airia reported that Vitam attacked her first."

"She is a Keshiri and her Tyro, of course she would say that."

"She used to be one of us!"

"Until that snake corrupted her!"

"I will not tell you again, silence! Vitam was the best of us and she bested him, she could kill us all."

"As I said, I am not here to kill anyone," Vestara interrupted flatly. "Tell me what is happening."

"As you command, Saber Khai," the dark-skinned Tyro clasped a fist over his chest. "We arrived with our master almost a week ago seeking artifacts of power and knowledge. Our master learned that a Sith sect called the Sorcerers of Tund had made their headquarters here and wished to unlock their secrets. We arrived without issue, deployed droids to set up the shield barriers around the mesa. We then deployed in this shuttle to begin excavations.

Everything was going fine until two days ago. We were in the third shuttle trip down when another hunter from the Tribe arrived in orbit and fired on our Master's command ship."

"Wait, third shuttle?"

"We only possessed one, and our numbers are limited," the Tyro elaborated. "We were shuttling down in shifts, sending anything of note back to our command ship and replacing the items with the remaining crew. There was to be two more trips back up after us. But when the other hunter arrived, his ship fired and it triggered something down here. The Sabers that were in this ship with us commanded us to stay and went off in search of High Lord Ahlarin. We haven't seen them since."

"And what of the Tribe's hunter?"

"We saw escape pods light up the sky after the temple disabled their vessel. Many landed on the other side of the mesa. We felt the rage and strength of the hunter and decided that attacking him would have been a waste of our lives."

"You made a wise choice," Vestara inclined her head. "The hunter is Saber Vran, one of the conquerors of Erilnar. No disrespect meant to your master's teachings, but he would have slaughtered you all without a thought."

"Thank you, Saber Khai."

"I will require your assistance in finding the others," Vestara voiced. "You have a bond to your master."

"You meant what you said when you swore not to kill him or force him back to the Tribe?"

"You doubt my word?" Vestara said dangerously.

"No, Saber Khai...it's just that...if you are a hunter as well, how will you explain your failure without being executed for incompetence?"

"I'll blame it on Vran," Vestara said casually. "Do not concern yourself with my well-being. Will you assist me or not?"

Tyro Daan looked to the others, who all nodded. Though some did so a bit more reluctantly than the others.

"We will."

"Good." Vestara peered into the ship at one of the infantry who was reaching to get his helmet. "Soldier, your name and rank?"

"Gilliar, Varner Gilliar. Sergeant First Class, Saber Khai," the man clasped a fist to his chest and bowed his head. He was easily twice her age, yet her status as a Force-user trumped it both in rank and social status.

"You and your men will be severely outmatched should fighting break out. Remain on the shuttle and see that it is ready to take off on a moment's notice," Vestara ordered. "I am sure you are eager to die for the Tribe, but not like this. Not when your death will mean nothing, on a dead world, more than likely at the hand of another member of the Tribe or ghosts of the past."

The five silver-clad soldiers stiffened slightly, but then sat back down in their seats. "We will obey, Saber Khai."

Feeling their resentment, Vestara almost brushed it off. She was a Sith, they were not. But then the lessons that annoying Jedi had imparted on her circled back almost on cue. She grimaced. "I know you men are skilled in the way of war. But this is not your war. There will be a time Lord Dals or myself will need your skills. This is not that time. Your lives are important to the Tribe. Use them to best serve the Tribe, not your selves because you were bored in a shuttle."

"We understand," the sergeant said.

Vestara felt the resentment lessen, but also felt surprise from the other Tyros. A Sith never had to explain their orders, they just gave it. Now she had another issue to deal with.

"Tyro Daan, how many others did your master have with him?" Vestara asked.

The Tyro appeared to debate with himself for a moment before he tilted his slightly in acquiescence. "There were four more Sabers and two more Tyros with him. He also took an escort of a dozen guards and conscripted some of the locals in a nearby system to assist."

"Good to know. Tyros, form up. If we all wish to leave this planet alive, we must guard each other's backs. We are of the Tribe, and this planet is against us. Remember that. Factions, loyalties, they

are pointless if they get us killed. Follow my command and I will get you all out of this."

"A promise?" Tyro Kasus sneered.

Vestara looked at him with a baleful eye and held up a hand. The next instant, the teenage Tyro was several meters off the ground and frantically clawing at his throat. She let her lightsaber fall to her hand and activate. "Tyro Daan, does this fool have any use beyond his idiocy?"

"He is an accomplished saberist, Saber Khai," the lead Tyro said carefully. "And he is still young yet."

"Fine," Vestara said, feigning exasperation as she let the Tyro go and turned off her saber. She would never have killed the boy, who was probably closer to thirteen, but they didn't have to know that. "So long as he knows that I am a Sith Saber and that I do not appreciate his disrespect."

"He understands now, right, Tyro Kasus?" Tyro Daan glared at the younger Tyro.

Still gasping for air, Tyro Kasus nodded frantically. "I do, Saber Khai, apologies."

"Accepted, this once." Vestara noticed that the third of Ahlarin's Tyros had remained silent. A Keshiri male with what looked like a saber scar diagonally across his face, he appeared to be the oldest Tyro in the shuttle. "And you, your name?"

"Vanri Sind," Tyro Daan supplied. "Before he came to serve High Lord Dals, his previous master crushed his throat, destroying his ability to speak. He was left for dead and our Master took him in as a...novelty project. Tyro Sind's rage is strong, his telekinesis impressive."

"And your skill is with words?" Vestara arched an eyebrow at the teen.

"Among others," Tyro Daan said evasively.

"This here is my Tyro, Jesdan," Vestara motioned with her head. "My other Tyro is somewhere on this planet."

"Airia," Tyro Daan nodded. "We feel her too. She was the weakest of

us and was selected by our Master to serve Vitam when Vitam was assigned to you."

"She seems able enough to me," Vestara said with a throw-away shrug, heading for the pyramid "Perhaps it's just that your Master and I define strength differently."

DL-IV-DL

The entrance to the temple had been cut open by a giant mining drill. Any Force-tricks that had been required had been rendered obsolete by the technology. Vestara led the way, with Tyro Daan next to her side. Jesdan brought up the rear with the other two Tyros.

"The pyramid complex actually goes deep underground," the dark-skinned Tyro murmured. Even then his voice seemed unnaturally loud in the narrow corridor. "We had only breached the third sub-level when things started falling apart."

"Any difficulties getting there?"

"According to the reports the first two teams sent back, none. It is almost as if the green fire purged the temple of the Force as well."

"It's strange that we haven't seen any sign of the others," Tyro Kasus whispered. "Or heard anything either."

"Maybe the defensive system trapped them somehow," Jesdan offered. "The lessons teach that Naga Sadow and the Sith Lords of their time laid traps in their places of power. I doubt the Sith of this era have changed that much."

They crept forward, the artificial lighting set up by Ahlarin's people showing the footsteps of those that came before them. They then reached what looked like a bottomless shaft. A rickety lift had been installed, instilling no one with any confidence.

Vestara experimentally put a foot on one of the panels of sheet-metal haphazardly welded together. The entire lift seemed to shiver. She stepped onto it, and the lift swung back and forth slightly but held. "Come on."

Carefully the group of teenage Tribe members stepped onto the dubiously crafted, primitive lift. A gesture to the control lever, and they were soon descending into the darkened bowels of the temple.

The shaft was deceptively shallow. Only a few minutes later did the basket of Tribe Sith reach the ground. Lightsabers sprang to life, as the area was still pitch black. And they immediately saw that something was wrong.

The area immediately surrounding the lift was ankle-deep in skeletal remains.

The team remained silent, disquiet filling the stale air.

Vestara knelt down to get a better look. Most of the skeletons appeared to be bipedal with humanoid features. They also appeared to have calcified somehow and were closer to stone. She rose, shaking her head. They had all been dead for a very long time.

"Let's go," Vestara motioned towards the passageway out.

They continued forward, cautious, almost skittish. Wherever they walked, the crunch of remains sounded loudly beneath their boots.

"The teams never reported this," Tyro Kasus muttered uneasily.

They stepped through several doorways, the doors themselves having been carved away by lightsaber blades. The hallway itself was decorated in strange glyphs and various precious metals and stones, carvings of individuals in great suffering being a common motif. In front of several of the images, they also found the bodies of some of the locals Lord Dals had employed, each of them strangely dessicated.

"Watch for pressure plates of any sort," Vestara said in a low voice. "Tyro Jesdan may have a point about this place being trapped."

The group moved even slower, especially after seeing the bodies of several silver-armored troopers who had accompanied Lord Dals. Vestara kept her pace slow, willing the others to not do anything that would kill them all. And then Tyro Kasus slipped on the skeletal remains of someone long dead and tried to recover. In doing so, his foot landed on a floor tile that sunk into the ground. The glimmering rubies that depicted the eyes of an individual on fire pulsed brightly.

Everyone froze.

"Be grateful the ancient Sith loved to terrify their victims before killing them," Vestara sighed, though she too needed a moment to

collect herself.

"Can I be grateful after the whole death thing isn't what happens next?" Tyro Kasus stammered, trying to mimic a statue as sweat beaded his forehead.

Vestara examined the hallway around the Tyro, attempting to see where the Tyro's demise would come from. It was during this examination that she noticed the ceiling panels above the Tyro had sagged ever so slightly. It was a hatch of some sort. When Kasus shifted his weight, the ceiling panels seemed to sag even more.

"Tyro Kasus, on my signal, I want you to throw yourself in my direction. Use the Force to augment your speed."

"Yes, Saber Khai," Kasus swallowed.

"The rest of you, behind me as well."

Vestara called upon the Force to hold the hatch in place and then nodded at the rest. Kasus did as ordered, and the rest watched behind Vestara with wide eyes. Vestara released the grip she had on the hatch and a fountain of white phosphorus came streaming down, immediately igniting on contact with the air. The place where Kasus had been standing, the floor tiles five deep behind it and five deep in front of it, the entire width of the hallway, disappeared in a near blinding blaze of white flame. When the fountain had run its course, the tiles and wall were charred a deep black, leaving little doubt that Kasus would not have survived.

"Tha...thank you, Saber Khai," Kasus managed, nearly hyperventilating.

"Be more careful next time, Tyro Kasus," was all Vestara said in turn. "Let us continue."

The hallway began to grow wider the lower it led them, the floor tiles giving way to a floor seemingly carved out of the mesa rock. The images on the wall also disappeared, likewise replaced by the natural rock of the mesa.

"Look, daylight!" Jesdan called out. He pointed towards the end of their passageway, where streams of sunlight were leaking in from a nearby room.

Sensing no immediate danger, the group investigated. The room

turned out to be a vast chamber lined with shelves. Whatever the shelves had held were long gone, more than likely victims of the green flame that had ravaged the planet. But that wasn't what caught their attention. A lifeboat from a ChaseMaster frigate, the same type that Vran had left in orbit, was sitting very out of place in the center of the room.

The heavier escape vessel had blown through the side of the mesa, if the crunched up front of the vessel was anything to go by. The trip through several meters of rock had torn apart much of the siding of the pod, leaving great gouges in what was left of the pod's exterior. They could immediately see that the two pilots had been killed on impact. The crumpled door of the lifeboat was embedded in the far wall in an obvious sign of anger.

"Saber Vran's work," Jesdan muttered, staring at the small crater the metal door had left.

Vestara focused more on the inside of the pod. Ignoring the sets of footsteps leading away from the craft, she could feel a life-force, however faint inside it. Knowing Vran, she knew that her fellow Saber had more than likely left his wounded behind. She stepped forward and peered into the badly damaged lifeboat. Inside the pod was a mess. The stench of death permeated the air and she was greeted by the immediate sight of two more dead bodies. From the looks of them, one had been pitched backwards onto a shard of the bulkhead. The other had suffered some sort of head trauma.

Vestara held her saber up for better illumination. More bodies were inside, though some looked to have succumbed to their injuries rather than die instantly.

"This escape craft was overloaded," Tyro Daan observed. "There are already three more dead inside than there should be."

"And we know that several still lived to walk away," Vestara nodded, gesturing to the tracks in the dusty ground. She continued to scan the bodies, searching for the faint signs of life she was feeling. "Jesdan, you brought their med-kit with us?"

"Yes, Saber Khai."

"We're going to need it."

"Saber Khai," Tyro Daan said in a low voice. "Why do we waste time healing Saber Vran's people? We are only strengthening our

enemies by doing so."

"I said back at your shuttle. Right now we are all members of the Tribe," Vestara whispered back, delving into the Force to aid in her search for the survivors.

She found the two faint sparks after a second and gingerly stepped over the corpses. Both survivors were Sabers she recognized from her campaign against the Starhoppers two years earlier.

"Saber Anyul, Saber Turg," Vestara allowed her lips to twist into a sarcastic grin at the sight of the unconscious, older blonde woman and the red-haired male. "Nice to see you two again. Tyros, get them out of there."

"Yes, Saber Khai."

Both wounded Sabers were pulled from the wreckage, their injuries extensive and severe. There was no doubt that they'd likewise succumb if left untreated.

"Use all of the supplies," Vestara directed, pointing to the med-packs. "If any of you have skills in the art of healing, I suggest you employ them now. It can be simple first aid, just use it. Concentrate your attentions on Saber Turg, I've got Anyul."

"Yes, Saber Khai."

The two Sabers were fading fast, moving them from the escapecraft doing them no favors. Bacta patches and injections were promptly deployed, the Tyros joining strength and attacking the more serious of injuries first. Anyul had severe internal bleeding, Turg a skull fracture and shattered arm. Vestara knew that saving both was more than likely a longshot, but she was taught to never turn away in the face of adversity.

Willing her strength into the dying Saber, she used her *parang* to cut off Anyul's tunic and armor. "Give me another one of those bacta packs."

"Her injuries are internal, she needs one of those tanks," Kasus protested even as Vanri passed one of the packs over.

"I know, but we don't have one," Vestara steadied her shaking hand and used her glass blade to make a deep incision in the unconscious Saber's chest, just between the ribs. She then gripped the pack and

emptied the contents in the cut she had made, daring the Force to make her efforts moot. "Another pack."

"Last one, Saber Khai."

"Her heart still beats, she still wants to live, give it to me."

Vestara emptied the second pack into the blonde woman's chest, and then activated her lightsaber and seared the wound shut. She then used the Force to accelerate the natural healing processes of both the Saber and the bacta. Time passed slowly, sweat dripping off her forehead as she continued to augment the injured woman before her. Finally, when she sensed the danger pass, she withdrew from her meditation. "How's Saber Turg?"

"He lives still. We think we have him stabilized," Jesdan replied, wiping at his forehead. "We've splinted his arm and used the Force to set the bones. He probably won't be doing any cliff-diving anytime soon, but he should recover."

"Good job," Vestara said, the words feeling foreign on her tongue. She once again sent a mental glare to the Jedi who was hopefully far away from Tribe space. "Fashion stretchers from the remains of that ship. No sense fixing them up only for them to die here."

Two make-shift stretchers were made, and Vestara had the Tyros carry both Sabers as was their rank. She led the way further into the temple, partially spent from healing Anyul but alert knowing that Vran and the others were out there somewhere.

The corridor they were in appeared to follow the perimeter of the pyramid, occasionally taking them lower, but never towards the center. There were other rooms they passed. Some looked like living quarters, others like work areas. All were devoid of anything of interest.

Until they found a body in front of the door way of a sealed room.

Two of them.

Both looked to have been victims of Sith Lightning.

"These bodies are fresh," Vestara said softly as the others carefully lowered their stretchers.

"Their clothes, they were of the Tribe," Tyro Daan noted. "Can't tell

who they were though."

"It almost looks as if they were trying to cut their way into this room," Vestara traced the saber scarring along the stone door.

"Temple security measure?" Jesdan voiced, scanning the door's frame.

"I wonder why they were trying to get through the door so badly," Kasus mused.

"Should we try and open the door?"

"And end up like Sabers Crispy and Carbonized here?" Vestara gestured to the downed Tribe members. "Nothing on the other side is worth risking your lives. Let's keep going."

But the corridor ended around the next corner, a looming, worn statue of some ancient Sith greeting them.

"Okay, back to the door then," Vestara sighed, wondering why things were never straight forward or easy with her people.

"How do you want to do this?" Tyro Daan asked.

"I'm the leader of this group, I'll take the risk," Vestara answered back. "The rest of you step back and shield the stretchers."

"Yes, Saber Khai."

Vestara stepped forward, and found herself jerking in surprise when Jesdan stepped up with her. "Tyro?"

"You are my Saber, Saber Khai," Jesdan replied. "I will either live or fall with you."

"Your choice," Vestara shrugged, feeling an unusual feeling in her chest. "Just a warning, I have no idea what I'm doing."

"Well, we're still alive for now, and we know that cutting into the door is probably a very bad idea."

"True," Vestara breathed out. "Shall we try to lift the door?"

"Worse that can happen is that we get flash-fried." Jesdan said with a wry grin, nodding.

Vestara and Jesdan held out their hands to the heavy stone door, and it began to tremble at their power. It rose a fraction of a centimeter before they both felt a powerful threat surge through the Force. They quickly abandoned their efforts as thick bolts of electricity surged out from the keystone in the door frame. Both dove to the side, and the electricity blew deep craters into the adjacent wall.

"Okay, now we know how the others died," Vestara panted, brushing herself off. The sudden dive had aggravated the wounds she had received in the crash and she once again had to rely on her rage to keep from appearing weak before the others.

Lightsabers activated, and Vestara looked over her shoulder to see Lord Ahlarin's Tyros step up. "We'll redirect the electricity."

"Sounds like a plan," Vestara steadied herself in front of the door "Tyro Jesdan, again."

We're trusting our lives to them?

Vestara nodded once in silent answer.

Again both Vestara and Jesdan tried to lift the door. Again, they felt the buildup of danger. This time when the keystone discharged, the trio of Ahlarin Tyros stepped forward and caught the electrical Force attack with their lightsabers. The door slowly rose, dust on the ground shaking as the members of the Tribe forced the ancient gears to work in reverse.

When it was high enough, Ahlarin's people used the Force to send the stretchers floating under the gap. But the electricity seemed to intensify at that point. Kasus let out a surprised cry when the current overloaded his lightsaber and blew out the power-cell.

"Jesdan, go!" Vestara ordered over the intense crackling of the electricity splashing against the two lightsabers left. "Tyro Kasus, you too!"

Both Tyros rolled under the gap.

"Tyro Sind, go!" Tyro Daan barked, the strain of keeping the bombardment from harming anyone twisting his face into a grimace. "Saber Khai, how do you want to work out this next part? I can't hold the stream off for much longer."

"Saber Khai, Tyro Kasus and I have the door from this side!" Jesdan called out.

Vestara quickly summoned her own saber and stepped in front of the stream. "Tyro Daan."

"Saber Khai," the dark-skinned Tyro nodded gratefully, switching his weapon off and rolling under the door.

Gritting her teeth, Vestara pressed onward, the defensive system seemingly wanting to turn her into a more electrifying version of herself. Timing it carefully. She shut off her saber and rolled under the door in one fluid motion. The electricity arced after her, but she was through.

The door slammed shut behind her with a resounding thud, and all was silent.

DL-V-DL

Vestara couldn't exactly believe what she was seeing. It was as if the ancient Sith of the planet had carved out the entire mesa, the pyramid at the top being little more than window-dressing. The underground cavern she and the Tyros were now staring at stretched onwards in the darkness. But there was one feature that was unmissable. A massive pyramid many, many times larger than the surface one. It towered in the darkened cavern, stretching up almost to the surface.

Surrounding it were rocky shapes that looked to have once been an army of sculptures and monuments.

"Oh...wow."

Vestara couldn't help but agree with the assessment. She was utterly speechless at the grandeur of it all. The only thing that took away from the majesty were several holes in the mesa wall that allowed shafts of light to penetrate the chamber. If her memory served her, Vestara knew that one of those holes had been caused by Airia's escape pod. The other holes probably had similar causes.

"Look!" Tyro Kasus gasped, pointing towards the very top of the pyramid.

The group followed his gesture and immediately saw what he was pointing to. A lightsaber battle was taking place, the red beams of

light from the lightsabers standing out in the darkness and flashing from repeated impacts.

"Vran," Vestara's eyes narrowed.

"And Saber Tythis, I recognize his presence," Tyro Daan said evenly.

The group, well too far away to make any difference, watched as the lightsabers flashed again and again. The two seemed to be evenly matched. And then they felt it, a life-force being extinguished. One of the red blades flickered off, and the other was turned off shortly after.

"Vran won." Vestara was partially relieved at that. She didn't want to think about what Kaara would do if Vran had fallen.

But the victory was soon the last thing on their minds as the entire pyramid seemed to light up in red energy, crackling blue electricity washing down its sides.

"The defensive measure!" Jesdan gasped.

"Turn off anything electrical, now!" Vestara warned, praying that the energy field wouldn't have an effect on their bodies. This close to the source, if the field was lethal, they'd probably be vaporized.

The glowing red pyramid pulsed, and the blue energy swept outwards through the chamber. A dust storm was kicked up all around, some of the surrounding sculptures breaking down in the maelstrom and falling. Vestara's group held up their hands in a last-ditch effort to ward off the combined effects of the storm of dust and energy. Even then, they were swept off their feet and thrown back into the stone door, held there by the torrent.

But at least they weren't vaporized.

The torrent shot upwards towards the ceiling, whipping with it a frenzy of debris. And then the cavern went deathly still.

Vestara, getting tired of being bounced up and down when all she really wanted was to rest for several days and recover, stood up once more. She coughed hard, tasting blood as she did. If she didn't get a bacta tank soon, she knew she'd be in trouble. She reflexively shielded her condition from the Tyros, instead projecting strength and confidence she didn't feel.

"Stretchers up," Vestara ordered firmly. The Tyros moved to obey.

The group followed the set of steps down towards the pyramid, the trip made in silence. They passed by the sculptures and various rocky shapes, an unnerving feeling descending when they realized that the smaller rocky shapes appeared to be carbonized people. It was almost as if a great battle had been fought eons ago. It was a relief when they reached the entrance to this inner pyramid. The minute they did, however, several things happened at once.

They had only a moment to notice several more fresh bodies before they felt a swell of Force-energy. Energy that had been missing from the planet, and then a keystone on top of the doorway flared to life. Instead of life-roasting electricity, however, several figures suddenly appeared in front of them.

"Red Sith!" Jesdan gasped at the forms the images had taken.

"Massassi," Vestara corrected automatically, her own surprise radiating from her. "And Kissai."

"Well, look at this," the tallest of the trio of images sneered. "*More intruders.*"

"*We go through thousands of years undisturbed and now we get yet another group of visitors?*" a shorter being snorted. "*At least they still serve the dark side.*"

"*Unlike the first two beings that disturbed us,*" the last of the trio agreed. "*Here we were, all ready to greet the heirs to our legacy, and it turns out the first visitors in millennia were Jedi! I never thought I'd see the day a Jedi, much less two of them, stepped foot on these hallowed grounds.*"

"Jedi?" Vestara interrupted, her suspicion spiking.

"*Yes, can you believe the audacity!*" the last said in fury. "*A Jedi, big as they come. And his smaller female apprentice. Waltzed right in here as if they owned the place, stole millennia's worth of research! And to make matters worse, they even altered the security systems.*"

"*It might not have been a Jedi,*" the second image argued. "*He knew how to manipulate the security systems in the first place, had a command holocron.*"

"*It was a Jedi alright. No mistaking the Light around that disrespectful*

fool. Hopefully the holocrons he stole will corrupt him and his apprentice. Serves them right!"

It took every ounce of willpower for Vestara to not hang her head and groan aloud. There was only one Jedi she knew of that would have the knowledge to raid a Sith temple. Especially from right out under the noses of an invading Sith armada. While her people had been focused on conquering Centrality, she had no doubt that Doran and his apprentice had gone straight for the ancient repository of knowledge and made sure it didn't fall into their hands.

Stupid, sneaky Jedi.

"As you said, we are servants of the dark. May we be allowed to pass?" Vestara tried.

All three images focused on her, and the air grew decidedly hostile.

"You claim to be servants of the dark. A blood price must be paid to enter this temple. Kill one of your attendants and the rest shall be allowed to pass."

Vestara arched an eyebrow. "Weaken my party to appease the ghosts of inferior beings?"

"That is the price," the tallest of the three said coolly. *"Blood for passage. That is our way."*

Vestara activated her lightsaber and let it spin around in her hands as she stalled for time. She noted the bodies on the ground and understood what had happened. "Is there any life in particular you prefer?"

"Any life is fine. If you are squeamish, you can even take your own."

"How did the Jedi get through then?"

"They brought a womprat with them." the second image said surly.

"What?" Vestara blinked.

"A womprat. They emptied its life right where you stood and gained access."

Vestara's eyes narrowed. "And your creators didn't take this into

account?"

"Who in their right mind would sacrifice a womprat to a Sith temple!?"

Vestara squeezed her eyes closed and took in several breaths lest she break out laughing. The indignation of ghosts long past was almost pathetic. "I have a sacrifice in mind."

"Great, take their life and be done with it."

"You aren't just holograms defending this place are you?" Vestara said lightly. "You have a personality matrix, a tangible presence in the Force."

"What of it?"

"That means you are, in a way, still living," Vestara hefted her saber once more. "And I believe the three of you will make a fine sacrifice."

She hurled her saber into the air, where it stabbed dead-on into the emitter buried in the keystone. All three images snarled in hatred at her, but as the keystone flickered off, so did they.

"You know, we probably should have done the same thing to that doorway back there," Jesdan said, breaking a bemused silence.

"We can do it on the way out," Vestara answered back casually, as if she hadn't just spiked a millennia old holocron with her lightsaber.

One of the giant square stones that made up the temple's base made a grinding sound as it began to lift, revealing an entrance into the actual temple.

"That actually worked," Tyro Daan said in shock.

And then the temple lit up in red light again, energy cascading along its side.

"Get inside!" Vestara ordered. The group hurried in, carrying with them the two unconscious Sabers.

"I'm beginning to understand how the Jedi sabotaged the security systems," Tyro Daan panted. "Violence or death causes it to activate."

"Which, because we are Sith, is a perfect countermeasure," Jesdan chuckled darkly. "Remind me to compliment the Jedi, before I run my saber into him."

"Step in line," Vestara said moodily.

Three lightsabers activating cut short the conversation.

"If it isn't Khai and a bunch of Tyros. Fancy meeting you here."

Vestara slowly turned her head to see a red blade centimeters away from her face. The owner of the blade was a Keshiri Sith.

"Saber Marjaak, Saber Walusari, Tyro Zin," Vestara said carefully. "So wonderful to see you alive. Still following in Vran's footsteps?"

The two Keshiri Sabers and one human Tyro kept their blades steady. "You know Vran. You're either with him or against him."

"Which begs the question," Saber Marjaak took over for his counterpart. "Which side are *you* on."

"The side of the Tribe, you purple idiot," Vestara stood slowly. "Surely you're aware that nothing is going to plan. This temple is more than likely going to blow up unless we team up and get out of here. As you can see, we've saved Turg and Anyul. Which is more than what Vran tried to do. Arrest, kill, or whatever me later. Right now I'd like to get off this dead rock and return to the Tribe. How about you?"

"You side with the traitor's Tyros," Marjaak noted.

Vestara let out an annoyed huff and thrust out her hand. A blast of Force energy knocked both Keshiri Sabers and the Tyro off their feet. Before they could recover, the Tyros behind Vestara summoned their lightsabers from the ground. "What part of 'I side with the Tribe' did you not get? If you and Ahri represent the pinnacle of Keshiri advancement in the Force, it's no wonder there are so few of you in the Circle of Lords. Now, let's try this again. Let's all get out of here *together*. Or, if you prefer, you can keep up with your idiocy and I can have my Tyros end your lives right now."

"Saber Vran will..."

"I'll deal with him," Vestara cut off Tyro Aris Zin. "Just fall in line and avoid stabbing my people in the back. I might get a little

annoyed if you do that. Marjaak, Walusari, you in?"

"For now," Marjaak grumbled.

The other Keshiri Saber nodded once.

"Good, now brief me on what's going on," Vestara ordered.

"Vran has me and Baad here guarding the door," Marjaak gestured to his fellow Keshiri. "Tyro Zin is near useless so he got to join us. Vran then went ahead with Sabers Shirru and Rulin to confront the traitor."

Vestara looked to Lord Dals' Tyros. "I don't know much about Lord Dals, but unless his saber skills matches his knowledge of the arcane, then Vran will crush him. Especially if those supporting Vran are Shirru and Rulin. The three together are absolutely brutal in their treatment of enemies of the Tribe."

"Our mission was to kill Lord Dals." Marjaak didn't seem to have a problem with the scenario Vestara had laid out.

"Our Master is an expert swordsman," Tyro Daan glared. "Saber Vran will not stand a chance."

"There, see," Vestara gestured to the Tyro while looking at Vran's people. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but Vran dead is not good for any of us. Even if he gets lucky and does kill Lord Dals, he's not going to be uninjured."

"Fine, we'll follow your lead, Khai. I've always wanted to be the one to kill the traitor anyways," Marjaak grumbled.

Vestara silently asked the Force for more patience as she stiffly replied. "That'll do, for now."

DL-VI-DL

The inner sanctum of the Sith Temple had very clearly seen better days. Though the mosaics and statues that lined the hallways gave it some atmosphere, the place lacked a certain aura about it.

"This place doesn't feel strong in the dark side at all," Tyro Kasus observed with a frown. "It feels...peaceful."

"More than likely the Jedi's doing," Vestara grumbled.

"What Jedi?" Marjaak scowled.

"Not important."

"That's not peaceful," Jesdan pointed to several corpses on the ground.

"Saber Tavas," Tyro Daan identified, after crouching down by the body and flipping it over. "One of Master's Sabers. The others look to be some of the locals."

"Two Sabers down," Vestara remarked, shaking her head.

"Saber Khai?"

"Tyro Jesdan?"

"What's a 'command holocron'? The specters in front mentioned that the Jedi had one."

"Again, what Jedi?"

"I'm not certain," Vestara shook her head, ignoring the Keshiri Saber completely. "But whatever it is sounded like a key to this place."

"But how did the Jedi come by one? A holocron that unlocks a Sith temple isn't something a Jedi just has with them, is it?"

"For the last time, what Jedi are you talking about!?"

"Shush Marjaak, you're not helping the conversation," Vestara said dismissively. She glanced to her Tyro. "It's probably something they found. It *has* been several thousand years since the Sith were dominant. I'm sure the ruins to our greatness are all over the galaxy."

The way up the temple sanctum revealed more bodies of the locals Lord Dals had 'hired' as well as one of the two other Tyros. They also found several rooms that appeared to have been deliberately sabotaged. Larger holocrons, probably centuries old, had been completely ruined. It was clear the Jedi had indeed done a thorough job in ensuring the Tribe couldn't recover anything of use.

Not found anywhere though was any sign of Vran, the two Sabers with him, or Lord Dals and his people.

"Great, back outside again," Jesdan groaned as the corridor led to an outside passageway.

"As long as no one kills anyone or tries to kill anyone, we should be okay," Tyro Daan said.

"We're doomed then," Saber Walusari deadpanned. "That's all Vran does. Kill people or try to kill people."

"Great attributes to have as an ally," Vestara said wryly. "Not so great when you're on the other side."

"Once we get to the security console at the top, we should be able to fix things," Tyro Kasus said hopefully.

"I really don't think the Jedi would have made it that easy," Jesdan shook his head.

"Well, we're not accomplishing anything standing here," Marjaak grumbled, pushing forward.

"Careful," Vestara warned, taking the lead. "If we encounter Vran or Lord Dals, no one make an aggressive move. There's no telling what level of violence sets off the security system."

"Understood."

They emerged back out into the vast cavern, finding that the fast trip back down was a lot further than they cared for. The only source of light they had were the holes in the mesa wall, casting pale beams of light that enabled them to barely see the path before them. The path wound around the outside of the pyramid, a sloping route that led to the very top. From their position, Vestara and the other Tyros could see where Vran had dispatched Lord Dals' other Saber. With only one way to go, they carefully followed the path, keeping an eye out for any threat.

"Body," alerted Vestara, the red glow of her saber falling on a still figure in the way. Worrisome was the fact that this figure looked extra crispy.

"It's Saber Nalik, I recognize the metal bracelet he wears. He was one of the ones following Lord Dals. Lightning trap?" Saber Kasus asked.

"Or he could have been hit by the full strength of that energy wave

we saw earlier. Stay alert."

The group passed the body without any repercussions. As they approached the top of the pyramid, they could hear crackling, electrical-like sounds. Whatever it was didn't sound stable or natural at all. When they reached the upper landing, the Tyros and Sabers were stunned.

Between the very peak of the pyramid and its base was a control-floor of some sort. It was active, kind of, with energy pulsating towards a central console and crackling up to the ceiling. What had the group stunned was the array of ray shields all across the open floor. Each ray shield held a very disgruntled member of the Tribe, all of whom stood upon the group's arrival.

"Master!" Tyro Daan called out, seeing Lord Ahlarin Dals trapped within one field.

"Saber Vran!" Marjaak gaped at the large Sith Saber trapped in another. The two Sabers with Vran were each in their own individual ray-shielded cell.

"Airia!" Jesdan recognized his fellow Tyro.

"Jesdan, Saber Khai, don't get any closer!" The Keshiri Tyro called back anxiously.

"How'd you get up here?"

"My pod crashed through the wall," Airia pointed to one of the holes. "And bounced across one of the lower tiers. Lord Dals' people found me and brought me with them."

Vestara arched an eyebrow of disgust at the group trapped in the ray shields. "The finest of the Tribe, all fallen for the same trap. Brilliant. What did you all do? See the first person get trapped and decide to go try to help or kill that person?"

There were sheepish nods all around.

"Lord Dals got trapped first so we tried to help," Airia supplied. "But then the security system tripped again and we ended up here. Then when Saber Vran, Shirru, and Rulin came, they saw us and decided to kill us in our prisons. And...they kind of got stuck too."

"And this is what happens when the Tribe starts turning on each

other," Vestara sighed, holding her head. "We turn into a bunch of idiots trapped by ray-shields on a millennia-old ruin."

"Thank you for that assessment, Khai," Lord Dals glared.

"My condition for freeing you all is that you all agree to a truce until we leave the system. It will be stupid of me to waste my time and effort saving your lives if all you're going to do is kill each other anyways. Agreed?"

After some grumbling, the rest nodded in agreement.

"You have a plan to get us out of this?" Vran glowered.

"Working on one."

Vestara glanced down at a pebble by her foot and kicked it into the active area of the floor. The floor shimmered, and the pebble crackled for a second, but nothing else happened. Using another pebble, she floated it over the floor, and this time got no reaction at all. She glanced down at the flagstone beneath her feet as an idea came to her.

"Tyro Daan, Tyro Jesdin, I'm going to need you to levitate both myself and the flagstone I'm on to that control console."

"Why the flagstone too?" Jesdin asked.

"I want some form of insulation between myself and the flooring. I'm unsure what type of circuits this place employs, but the stone appears impervious to the currents. I could levitate one of you without a flagstone to test the theory if you prefer."

"We'll trust your judgment," Jesdin said quickly.

Vestara smirked at him. "Thank you. Whenever you're ready."

Vestara felt some trepidation on this matter. Normally Tribe members who trusted their lives to another completely ended up regretting it. She hoped this wouldn't be the case. She felt the Force swell between the two Tyros and the flagstone beneath her shift in its place. She steadied herself with the Force, keeping her balance as the flagstone lifted off the ground with her on it.

"Okay, slowly, towards that central console."

Vestara was well aware that all eyes were on her. She was either going to be the savior of the day or look really, really foolish. Fortunately for her, the Tyros were able to float her to the control console in the middle of the room without any problems.

"A little lower," Vestara called back. Soon she was hovering only a few centimeters off the ground.

It was then she ran into a problem. The control console was completely dead. She tried flipping a few switches, but nothing happened.

"Lord Dals, any ideas?" Vestara looked to the older Tribe member. "The computers are all dead."

"They require a power-source," Lord Dals replied. "My studies of this place showed that a holocron-like device was needed."

"Would you happen to have one?"

"I was hoping to study the computer directly to see if there were any alternatives," Lord Dals shook his head.

"Wonderful." Vestara looked over the computer controls, scanning every dial and button. "Is there any reason why this control panel is so complex? It seems a lot for a security system."

"I haven't had a chance to look at it."

Vestara's eyebrows rose. She sensed no deception, but at the same time could feel the older Tribe member was holding something back. Knowing that the man probably wasn't going to share it, however, Vestara didn't want to waste her time debating with him.

"Float me to the computers on the other side," Vestara directed her Tyros.

The Tyros did as ordered, levitating Vestara so that she was facing a new bank of equal dead computers. This side, however, had a pyramid-like construct embedded into the console that looked very similar to a Sith holocron. It was just as inactive as the rest of the console, but definitely stood out.

"The computers need a power-source?" Vestara called back, checking with Lord Dals.

"Yes?"

Vestara stared at the triangular nodule and then released a breath. Again, savior or foolish. She held out a hand and let a stream of Sith Lightning crackle from her fingertips and into the device. The effect was instantaneous. The computer system sputtered, flickering on and off as the lightning coursed through it.

"Saber Khai!" The Tyros yelled in warning.

Looking over her shoulder, Vestara could see that the inside of the mesa was lit up in red light. She climbed onto the console and yelled at the group. "Take cover inside!"

The group hurried forward bringing the two unconscious Sabers with them as the blue energy began crackling along the sanctum's exterior. The group only made it a few steps inside before ray-shields snapped around them, keeping them trapped. Vestara stayed on top of the computer console, one hand continuing to send Sith Lightning into the holocron-like nodule. She eyed several more controls and activated them. There was an audible hum and the entire central control system switched on.

"Security controls, security controls," Vestara muttered, scanning the bank of computers. "There."

She hit another switch and the ray shields all deactivated and the energy build up outside seemed to stabilize for a moment. At the same time, a hologram appeared in the space at the very center behind the consoles. Vestara recognized the Jedi in the hologram immediately and inwardly had to wince as she braced herself.

"Greetings to whichever Master, Lord, Saber, Tyro, unlucky..."

"Master, just get on with it!"

"Okay, fine. So you figured out that teamwork was needed to get to the computers and turn off the ray shields. Well done. Unfortunately for you, reactivating the power to this place triggered a counter-down. To what you might be wondering? Well, my apprentice and I accidentally stabbed the power-stabilizers of this battle cruiser's main reactor with our lightsabers. Powering up the pyramid again will have caused a cascading failure in the subroutines that limit the energy flow. You have, maybe ten minutes to get clear of the blast zone. Never seen one of these go up before, so not sure what the radius is going to be. Sorry about that, but I couldn't have you zooming around the galaxy in a ship with

Force-controlled weaponry."

"Battle-cruiser?" Vestara spun to Lord Dals with wide eyes. "What's he talking about?"

"Never mind that, we need to get clear!" Lord Dals yelled.

Vestara saw that he was right. Already the power to the floor was flickering on and off uncontrollably, the red light illuminating the cavern was likewise fluctuating, and she could feel a buildup of danger beneath her feet. The entire mesa was shaking, rocks falling down from the ceiling.

"No way we can outrun a blast if this structure goes up," Vran growled.

"Sergeant Gilliar," Vestara said into her comm. "We need immediate evac now!"

"Understood, where are you?"

"Inside the mesa!" Vestara said anxiously. More rocks continued to cascade downward, and the sanctum itself began to shake violently. "Hurry!"

The shuttle with the troopers onboard made its appearance in dramatic fashion. Lasers plowed through the weakened roof of the mesa, and the shuttle descended with ramp open.

"You'll have to jump, we can't touch down!" Shouted one of the other troopers.

"Wounded first," Vestara directed her Tyros. They nodded and used the Force to send Anyul and Turg up into the hovering shuttle. "Tyros, go."

"No, we're Sabers, we're going first," Marjaak growled, shoving Tyro Zin and Jesdan aside. He leaped upwards, followed by Vran, Shirru, and Rulin.

"My lord," Tyro Daan deferred to Lord Dals and his Saber.

Once they were up, Vestara ordered her Tyros to follow. "Go!"

Both Jesdan and Airia nodded gratefully and leaped up into the shuttle. It was at this moment, though that a falling boulder

bounced off one of its wings and destabilized the shuttle's position. The impact sent Jesdan flying back out the ramp. Vestara quickly reached out with the Force and caught him mid-fall. With great care, even as the ground began to shift under her feet, she brought the Tyro back down to the ground next to her.

"Watch your step next time, Tyro," Vestara said weakly.

"Yes, Saber Khai, apologies," Jesdan breathed out, wide-eyed.

"We can't stay here!" The trooper called out, another rock bouncing off the shuttle and creating visible damage. "Wait, what are you doing?"

Vestara looked up in shock to see Tyro Airia jumping back down onto the sanctum.

"Staying with my Saber!" The Keshiri called back. "Go!"

The shuttle crew didn't need to be told twice as it powered up and shot back out the hole it made.

"Saber Vran and Lord Dals in the same shuttle," Saber Walusari remarked dubiously. He and Tyro Zin were the two others who had been stuck along with Vestara and her Tyros.

"If they kill themselves it's on them," Vestara couldn't help but laugh. "Tyro Airia, I appreciate your loyalty, but you should have left."

"Saber Vran or Lord Dals would have killed me if I didn't swear loyalty to them. Even then my survival wasn't guaranteed," Airia answered firmly. "At least I know that under your leadership you will not stab me in the back."

"You just jumped back down on top of an ancient Sith construct about to explode, you might have lived longer if you left," Vestara deadpanned.

"You'll figure something out."

"I find your faith in me disturbing."

"Look, another ship approaches!" Tyro Zin called out, gesturing towards one of the holes in the mesa wall.

Said ship used its lasers to make the hole bigger. When it did, the ship's full profile came into view.

"No," Vestara shook her head.

"Saber Khai?"

"I am not going to owe my life to Ahri," Vestara protested weakly. "I'll never hear the end of it."

The shuttle swung into position and the ramp lowered. From the pilot's seat, Ahri Raas called out to the others. "Come on! I don't have all day!"

"Come on, Saber Khai."

"No, no, no," Vestara groaned, reluctantly allowing her Tyros to pull her towards the edge of the quaking pyramid.

"We'll help you kill him later," Jesdan tried to cheer up his Saber.

"You better," Vestara muttered disgruntledly, making the leap with the others.

"We're all aboard," Saber Walusari told his Keshiri brethren.

"Great." The shuttle rotated towards the hole in the roof and shot off through it.

The shuttle was nearing the upper atmosphere when its occupants all heard the massive explosion rumble from below. Those nearest peered through the viewport and were treated to a gigantic ball of fire spouting out from the remains of the mesa. The blast radius was truly impressive indeed, sending shockwaves racing across the surface of the planet for several dozen kilometers. The entire mesa had more or less been disintegrated in the blast, everything on, in or above it completely vaporized.

Vestara looked to the Keshiri pilot, the good feelings caused by Airia's loyalty evaporating at the sight of Ahri Raas. "How'd you get the shuttle running again?"

"The wave hit your fighters first," Ahri explained. "I killed my ship's power as soon as I saw it mess with your electronics. Used gravity and the Force to land."

"Great," Vestara said tonelessly.

"I did save your life."

"Great."

"Don't be like that. At least you helped Saber Vran capture that traitor and his people. High Lord Taalon will be pleased."

"Ahri, why don't you take credit for that. After all, if it wasn't for you, I'd be dead. Tell High Lord Taalon that you were instrumental in getting me and the others off the planet. He might even sponsor you for a position in the Circle of Lords."

"And you?"

"Does it look like I want High Lord Taalon breathing down my neck?" Vestara arched an eyebrow. "Make up some story about how my incompetence jeopardized your operation and that I would only be a threat to myself because of my delusions. Let him think I'm truly a nobody who got lucky when a defective Meditation Sphere chose me."

"Say I tell High Lord Taalon that you are an accomplished schemer and a danger to both him and the Grand Lord."

"Then I'll have to relay your tragically heroic death saving the lives of Vran and the others before that happens," Vestara said coolly, resting her *parang* across his neck. "We don't have to be adversaries, Ahri. But get in my way and you'll see just how much of a danger I can be to *your* life."

"You know how to make a point, Saber Khai."

"You'll do as I say?" Vestara asked, using the Force to sense even the slightest of deception from the Saber before her.

"Either lose my life or get one step closer to the Circle of Lords. Not a hard choice."

"Glad you still have some intelligence, Saber Raas."

The sensor computer began blinking.

"What is it?" Vestara asked, sheathing her *parang*.

Ahri checked, then arched an eyebrow at her. "Detecting an escape-pod launched from the shuttle."

Vestara stretched her senses out, then looked at Ahri in disbelief. "Please tell me that's not Vran and the others I sense crammed into it."

Ahri likewise looked at the distant pod in bemusement. "Can't do that. How'd Lord Dals overcome all of them?"

"Let's not ask Vran when we recover him. He might be a little sore about the subject."

"Especially since he's in a pod built for two but holding six."

"Guess your glory for bringing in Lord Dals will have to wait," Vestara said reluctantly.

"I'll let you open the pod and greet Vran's group," Ahri shrugged. "Any idea how we're going to report this to the High Lord now?"

"No need to report to him unless we have something good to report," Vestara shrugged. She reached into her tunic and activated a datapad. She then showed the pad to Ahri. "The tracking device is working. Following them seems like a good idea."

"You just happen to carry tracking devices around with you?"

"Standard issue field gear for hunters," Vestara gestured to her utility belt. "Besides, they owe me a new armor set. They made me come to that sweltering world and I had to leave mine behind."

"They can't get far in just a shuttle, and all of the Tribe is looking for them in Centrality," Ahri remarked. "We'll find them."

"It looks like their route is taking them out of Centrality," Vestara pointed. "Smart since they know they'll be hunted."

"Extrapolating based on current hyperspace lanes," Ahri fiddled with a few controls. "There, they're headed for some planet called Boonta. It's just outside of Centrality."

"We're going to need help then," Vestara said darkly. "Set course for the *Dark Blade*. I'm sure that since we have Vran on board his sister will be amiable to assisting our mission."

"Setting course for the giant triangle ship," Ahri said with just a touch of cheekiness. "Just out of curiosity, Khai. Since you're opposed to killing the man, how do you plan to take down a Sith Lord who will be more than happy to kill you to avenge his son?"

"That's simple," Vestara snorted. "By offering him something much more than my life."

"And that would be?"

"Eternal glory. What Sith will be able to refuse the chance to have their names whispered alongside the likes of Naga Sadow, Ludo Cresh, and the rest?"

"He'll never go for it. You have nothing that will give him that."

"He can be the first Lord in the Tribe to sign onto my vision and help make the Sith Empire we desire a reality," Vestara answered simply. "There are many benefits to being first. And since he already has a death sentence on his head, he has nothing to lose either. I'm going to let the others know what's going on. You just be a good pilot and get us to where we need to go."

"And you want me to tell the Grand Lord that you're no threat," Ahri muttered under his breath after Vestara left the cockpit. "Your arrogance will definitely be your downfall, Vestara Khai."

DL-Chapter End-DL

A\N: Next chapter, next week. Hope you all are enjoying this! After FDL is done, chapter 6 of Legacy Side B will be posted. Then there might be a little break as I work on Legacy A, Legacy B, A Darkened Destiny, and the penultimate story arc of Forging the Future. I also just returned to work after recovering from my medical thing so both my time and energy are on the lower side of things for now. Any updates after chapter 6 Side B will be whenever I am able to post them.

5. Chapter 5

Chapter 5

DL-I-DL

The problem with being in a Star Destroyer was that it was very noticeable if you showed up in a system with one. Lord Dals, in a shuttle, had no such worries. At the same time, being relatively new to the galaxy, the forces of the Lost Tribe didn't exactly want to go anywhere without the comfort of a ship that could level whole cities from space.

Lancing out of hyperspace at the very edge of the Dernatine system, the *Dark Blade* came to a full stop.

"Comm-scans, report," Kaara ordered abruptly.

"Detecting minimal traffic in the region. Most of the transmissions are coming from a single planet, Boonta. Readings indicate there's some kind of orbital scrapyard, with most of the active ships in the area being trawlers or cargo-vessels."

"And Lord Dals?"

"Ion trail matching the profile of his ship leads to the planet as well. Computer is still extrapolating a possible landing site."

"Stay on the edge of the system and remain unobtrusive." Kaara held up her comlink. "Vran, Dals is here. You and Khai may launch when ready."

"*Any security forces we need to deal with?*" Vestara asked in turn.

"The planet's a garbage world with minimal value," Kaara responded. "If there are any security forces, you'll be able to deal with it."

"*Understood,*" Vestara's unhappiness with the answer bled through, but Kaara ignored it.

"Assault shuttles launching," the hangar-control tech reported. "Fighter escort is following. All report green."

"Still scanning, no sign of orbital defenses or enemy capital ships.

Ground defenses on Boonta remain unknown as we are too far out."

"Very good. Continue scanning. We do not want to be caught off guard this far away from the rest of the Tribe."

I-I-I-I

Boonta's Chief of Security was a surly Nikto named Tadan, whose family had served the Hutts for generations. One of the few soldiers in Hutt Space who had served and survived both the Yuuzhan Vong War and the Killik War, he was no stranger to battle. He considered his posting to Boonta an honor. Every formation a parade. Every day, a war against the forces rallying against the Hutts. And though he had been given a garrison of a little less than two-hundred to safeguard the entire planet, he considered that garrison the best of the best. After all, he was the one who had whipped the sorry excuses for guards into a fighting force that would make any Hutt envious. He had then conscripted the local population, forming a fighting force that was, in his mind, second-to-none in the entirety of Hutt Space.

Combat drills started before the sun rose. Inspections were weekly. And though his force had little in the way of ships and vehicles, they had an entire planet of parts at their disposal. Upon taking the post nearly two years earlier, he had had the engineers scavenge what they could from the countless starship wrecks that littered the planet. The result was a two-fighter squadron force of Uglics and a full unit of combat-walkers to compliment the few vehicles granted to him by the glorious Hutt Council. Turbolaser and ion batteries from wrecked starships were installed at strategic places all over the planet, starship-grade shield generators scavenged and likewise put to work. Tadan had even pressed the local police force into his garrison to quadruple the number of soldiers at his command.

All in all, Boonta may have been a backwater world lying on an unimportant hyperspace lane, but it was probably the best defended backwater world anyone would ever see. Tadan might not have been present when the Yuuzhan Vong invaded nearly two decades earlier, but he was determined that any attempt to take the planet wouldn't be the cakewalk it had once been.

Already they had blasted a shuttle from the skies. Some pirate pretending to be a Sith Lord. It had been a pathetic ruse. Everyone knew that the Sith had been defeated by the Jedi. The shuttle had crashed in one of the more inhospitable parts of the planet, and the Nikto security chief didn't bother to send anyone to check on the

status of its occupants. If the pirates survived the salt-flats, maybe they'd be tough enough to join his garrison.

"Chief," his tough-as-durasteel Gen'Dai lieutenant entered the office.

"Dushatt," the Nikto greeted. "What do you have for me today?"

"All units are in readiness," the Gen'Dai reported, handing his boss a datapad. "All sectors secure."

Tadan scanned the datapd, nodding at the reports. He then gestured with the device at his right-hand-man. "Good, good. The Boonta Eve Classic is only a handful of galactic months away and I don't want any screw ups. Double security on any vital areas, and have those civilian militias we've drafted take up security along the perimeter of the racetrack. Make sure the construction crews are secure. Circuits all across Hutt Space are gearing up for this and I will not have them outclassing the site of the Boonta Eve Classic."

"Yes, sir."

"I want all turbolaser and ion batteries test-fired as well. Status reports and diagnostics are all well and good, but I've learned firsthand that one screw-up can be the difference between life and death."

"I'll have the crews gear up."

"Lastly," Tadan held up a hand. "I want the fighter squadrons and support ships performing maneuvers again. They were out of sync during the last five minutes of yesterday's drill, and with Farthaava the Hutt arriving next week, that is unacceptable. Have all other traffic clear the area. The fighters and support ships are free to shoot down any vessel that doesn't comply."

"Understood."

"Good, I'll be on the command ship this afternoon to supervise them myself. Maybe that will help motivate them."

I-II-I-II-I

"All quiet on approach," Tyro Airia reported.

"We remain undetected," Tyro Jesdan confirmed from the co-pilot's chair.

"Force-meld stable," the third Tyro in the ship, Aris Zin finished off. He was in the passenger seat, eyes shut as he focused on maintaining a link to the meld-user in Vran's shuttle.

Standing behind her Tyros with her arms folded in front of her, Vestara nodded. "Good. Keep skirting the gravity profiles of the other planets. No sense revealing ourselves before we have to."

"I don't think that's what Saber Vran has in mind," Airia pointed to the transport in front of them.

"Saber Shirru is relaying that Saber Vran is confident we can successfully go up against any backwater security force in the area," Tyro Zin relayed almost apologetically.

"What a surprise," Jesdan rolled his eyes. "If he gets us killed, I am going to be very angry."

"Ahri, do something about it," Vestara gestured to her childhood rival on comms.

"Like?" Ahri said archly. "That *is* Vran you're talking about."

"Yeah, well, Saber-soon-to-be-Master Kaara still prefers her brother to be among the living. Made it pretty clear that our continued ability to draw breath depends on that."

"We can always just follow him out of the planetary gravity shadow. We are two assault transports and a squadron of fighters. How much security does anyone put on a junkyard planet anyways?"

"Detecting movement above Boonta," Jesdan warned. "Fighters are being deployed and two picket-ships are increasing speed. A light cruiser or carrier of some type just popped out of Boonta's gravity shadow and is forming up with the others."

"Blast it, they probably glimpsed his profile," Vestara cursed.

"No choice now," Ahri sighed. "Shall I give the order?"

"Go ahead."

"This is Kyber Two to Tribe expedition forces, accelerate to attack speed. *Dark Blade*, local garrison has detected us, requesting heavy support."

I-III-I-III-I

"All units, begin maneuver Crispa Chizk," Duros captain and Yuuzhan Vong War veteran Ondal Ty barked. His stint with the Hutts wasn't exactly the retirement he had dreamed of, but the Hutts had invested heavily in rebuilding Duro and he felt obligated to help out. It wasn't all that bad, definitely helped that the higher-ups in charge of the planet had real combat experience too. "Let's get it right this time. Keep the formation tight and stick to the plan."

"Fighters deploying."

"Nice, looking real nice," Ondal remarked, his experience telling him what military precision was when he saw it. "That's what I've been talking about. XO, keep the liquor cabinet locked up next time, would you. The boys can celebrate after the drills, not before."

"Yes, sir. Sorry about that."

"Okay, follow the *Beesga* and *Fierfek*. Let's see if we can't impress the Chief with a few fancy formations."

"Emerging from Boonta's outer orbit," the helmsman smiled.

"Let's try formation Dopa Bunko."

Ondal watched in approval as the ships of Boonta's Orbital Defense Force seamlessly transitioned into a classic Hutt fleet formation. But before they could complete the transition, he heard the sensor computers blare out in warning.

"Sir! We have hostile ships closing in fast! Two *Gamma*-class assault transports and a squadron of unknown-type fighters!"

"Shields up, load all missile tubes," Ondal ordered coolly. Briefly wondering if this was some test his boss had planned. It would be just like Tadan to do this after the poor performance of the pilots the other day. "Gammas are tough nuts to crack so focus fire on the lead vessel only. Let our fighters handle theirs."

"They're breaking formation!"

"Sir! A Star Destroyer has been detected at the edge of the system. *Victory*-class!"

"A Star Destroyer?" The captain scowled. Despite the training his people had received, they were no match against a capital ship, especially if it had a full fighter compliment. "Tell our units to pull back. Full retreat!"

"Sir?"

"If that cruiser enters battle, we're all dead. We need to draw it into range of the planetary batteries, the transports and enemy fighters too. No sense wasting our lives."

"Understood, relaying orders."

"Multiple ships deploying from the Star Destroyer," another called out. "Detecting the same type of unknown fighter-class as well as several gunboats."

"All the more reason to fall back. Withdraw to the opposite side of the planet, if they want to land, we'll let them. And then we'll blast them apart from orbit."

I-IV-I-IV-I

"Garrison is pulling back," Jesdan announced. "Fighter squadron Three-Three is taking the lead, Kyber One following them."

"Stay on course," Vestara cautioned. "We don't have the firepower to win in a direct fight."

"Hopefully the holo-drones Saber Kaara deployed made a difference," Airia said, steering their assault shuttle a few hundred kilometers behind Vran's.

"I think just having the *Dark Blade* present gave them pause." The Keshiri Saber Ahri Raas touched his earpiece. "Detecting multiple encrypted transmissions from the enemy ships to the surface of the planet."

"Probably telling them that they're on their own," Jesdan shrugged.

Vestara nodded, but something began to gnaw at her stomach. "How's our shields?"

"Operating at a hundred percent, why?" Jesdan looked back over his shoulder.

"I want power from both weapons and engines transferred to the shields," Vestara half-answered. "Keep scanning the enemy ships. They withdrew without firing a shot."

"They *are* a backwater security garrison," Ahri said.

"With two picketships, a carrier and several squadrons of fighters?" Vestara arched an eyebrow. "And that's just the ships we're seeing."

The sensor console began squawking once more.

"Target lock from the planet's surface!" Airia yelled.

Suddenly a barrage of turbolasers began flying out, thick green beams as thick as their ship. The fighters of squadron Three-Three received the brunt of it, unable to veer away in time as the devastating attack blew away half their number in the blink of an eye. The shields of Vran's shuttle flared opaque as it endured several hard hits, and then collapsed completely. During that time, the pilot of the transport had pushed all power to the engines and made a beeline for the planet. The next few tubrolasers missed wide.

And then it was Kyber Two's turn to brave the storm.

"If we get shot down for a second time chasing Lord Dals, I am really not going to be happy," Vestara muttered under her breath. Despite Airia trying to pilot around the storm of planetary defense fire, their own shields were taking a beating.

"Four, maybe three more hits and our shields are out," Jesdan said, his jaw clenched. Their shuttle was rocking back and forth as if someone was banging on the outer hull trying to get.

"We just need to hit the atmosphere," Airia exhaled, the Force flowing through her as she avoided dozens of lethal energy bolts. "It'll scramble their targeting sensors for a bit, and then we can accelerate to drop below their tracking envelope."

"You've studied planetary turbolasers?" Ahri blinked.

"Yes, Saber Raas. If I'm piloting a ship, I'd like to know how to avoid things that can shoot me down," Airia sent their shuttle into a spin it wasn't designed for.

"I feel really bad for the troops back there," Ahri gestured to the rest

of the transport as his safety harness kept him in his chair.

"They are of the Tribe, they'll survive," Vestara rolled her eyes. Unlike Ahri, she had been standing during that particular maneuver and was now picking herself off the ground. She quickly climbed into the spare seat as the planet filled the cockpit window.

"Shields out," Jesdan announced.

"Hitting atmo now!" Airia said almost simultaneously.

The banging of turbolasers rocking their shuttle stopped, to be replaced by a moment of eerie silence. That silence lasted a few seconds before the turbolasers reacquired their target locks and resumed firing. This time, within the atmosphere, the shrieking barrage seemed all the more terrifying.

The *Gamma*-class transport shot through the sky like a burning arrow, sonic booms decimating the air behind it. Turbolasers continued to track it until it dropped even further, blazing a path across several mountains of starship debris and sending metal shards flying.

"Brace for hard landing!"

The transport slammed into the ground, skipped back up into the sky, and then slammed into the ground once more. Miraculously, it maintained its structural integrity, even as it blew through another mound of debris and came to a sliding stop along a stretch of yellow and red sand.

"Airia, who taught you how to fly?" Jesdan groaned, rubbing at his neck.

"Flying I have no problem," the Keshiri Tyro said defensively, trying to stem the bleeding from a gash on her forehead. "It's the landing-while-being-shot-at-by-a-planetary-wide-defense-system that I never learned."

"You did well, Tyro," Vestara commented, undoing her harness. "When the alternative is being blown up or losing another transport, I prefer this outcome."

"Thank you Saber Khai," Airia bowed her head in thanks.

"What junkyard world has a planetary defense system anyways?"

Ahri grumbled. "Is there something on this planet of value or something?"

"What better way to hide something valuable than among trash?" Vestara concurred. "But that is not our goal for the moment."

Ahri frowned. "This planet is well defended with a sizable garrison, it will be a boon if we claim it for the Tribe."

Vestara made a face, as if she had just bitten into a very sour fruit. Despite her dislike of Ahri's scheming, she had to admit, however grudgingly, that he had a point. "It *would* definitely aid in our search of Lord Dals. We'll need Kaara and the others on her ship if we do decide to take this planet though."

Airia paused from bandaging her wound. "Sabers, the defense system would blow the *Dark Blade* from orbit. We'd have to disable it if we want orbital support."

Vestara nodded to show that she heard. "Lord Dals still remains our priority for the moment."

"As we hit atmo, the computer finished the projected trajectory," Jesdan said. "Unfortunately, that's on the other side of the planet."

"Has the computer taken into account that his shuttle was most likely also shot down?" Vestara asked.

"No," Jesdan blinked. "The turbolaser batteries weren't part of the initial calculations."

"Run the program again."

"Yes, Saber Khai."

"Any sign of Vran?"

"Computer tracked them crash-landing several thousand kilometers away," Jesdan checked.

"Saber Shirru reports all survived," Tyro Zin supplied once he was able to re-establish the meld.

"Ahri, can you raise them?"

"Been trying," Ahri shook his head. "But I think their comm-unit

took a hit, all I'm getting is static."

The sensor panel chirped again.

"What now?" Ahri groaned.

Jesdan checked. "Ground forces approaching fast. Several armored vehicles and...two walkers of some sort."

"This should be good," Vestara sighed, rubbing her face before clipping her mask into place. She pulled up a readout of their immediate area and studied the terrain.

"Time to rally the guys in silver," Ahri remarked, spinning his lightsaber around in his hand as if it were a blaster.

"Tyro Jesdan, Tyro Airia, Tyro Zin, stay at my side," Vestara ordered. "Ahri...do whatever."

"Yes, your great schemingness," Ahri said dryly. "You're technically still a slave you know."

Vestara ignored him, hitting the button to enter the back of the transport. There, four dozen of the Tribe's finest stood at the ready. The squad leaders in gleaming red armor stepped forward, a hand clasped over their chest in brief salute.

"Enemies on approach, infantry and heavy mechanized units," Vestara announced. "Surrounding terrain is flat with a deep ravine to the west. We also left a large furrow in the ground when we landed. If possible, capture of one of the larger mechanized units. I also want survivors to interrogate. Again, do so only if it does not further endanger your lives. Your goal is not to die for the Tribe, but to live for it. Deploy."

The silver-armored trooper hit the button by the rear ramp, and the Tribe soldiers hustled out. At a more sedate pace, Vestara led the other Force-sensitives from the ship.

"I have the transport's dorsal guns on auto," Airia explained. "They should provide adequate air-cover. Shields are also recharging, so the longer the garrison takes to get here the better."

"I don't think we're going to have that luxury," Ahri pointed to the sky. In the distance was a full squadron of makeshift aerofighters. From their speed, they'd arrive just before the ground troopers in

well-timed precision.

"Incoming artillery!" One of the Tribe's soldiers called out, the sun gleaming off his very shiny armor.

"Tyros," Vestara directed. "You three on anti-artillery duty. Ahri and I will help with the air-support."

Aris Zin, Jesdan and Airia hustled to opposite ends of the Tribe's defensive line and dropped into meditative positions. When the explosive shells got close, the three Tyros redirected the attacks to fall harmlessly away from the troopers. Another more focused volley was launched from the distant garrison forces. Jesdan used the Force to detonate one in mid-air, wiping out several other shells. Airia redirected another shell side-ways, causing it to veer into the path of another. Zin used the meld with the other two Tyros to supply them with his own strength, enhancing their abilities.

Vestara watched with a smug smirk. Redirecting artillery shells was basic training for members of the Tribe. Of course, it wasn't shells that were rained down on them but large boulders. Nothing kicked in the self-preservation instinct more when your master was levitating rocks larger than you were high in the air over you and letting you catch them with the Force. Tyros started out with one rock, then eventually graduated to however many your master could levitate at one time.

And now Jesdan and Airia were demonstrating their own strength as they turned the rain of artillery shells into a fireworks display in the middle of day.

"Impressive," Ahri remarked.

"Can't take all the credit," Vestara muttered. "Jesdan and Airia had Lord Dals as their Master before me. Aris had to put up with Vran."

"They're still alive because of you," Ahri pointed out, kneeling as the air-support drew closer.

Vestara matched his position and drew upon the Force.

The fighter-jets dropped even lower, a giant cloud of yellow-red sand flaring into the air behind them as they raced across the desert-like landscape, breaking the sound-barrier. The Tribe's landed black-colored transport was a sitting duck, standing out

against the bright landscape. As the fighters came into weapon range, the transport's automated defenses kicked in. The dorsal lasers turrets began belching out destructive green bolts of energy.

Two of the lead aircraft were destroyed. The rest either dropped even lower or entered a steep climb. The ones who dropped lower promptly returned fire with a barrage of super-heated metal. Evidently resources were scarce enough that they couldn't afford the Tabana needed for laser cannons.

Vestara and Ahri remained unmoving, ignoring the still persistent but ineffective artillery barrage in the background. They were linked through the Force, their childhood trials enabling them to reach a deeper level of symbiosis than most. They both opened their eyes in unison, the Force pushing the dust around them away as they reached out with their strength.

The wave of Force energy was one-directional pushing outwards and washing over the hundreds of projectiles fired at the transport. The almost plasma-state metal darts stopped where they were, and the remaining aircraft veered off in panic. The movement caused another to be destroyed in his hasty climb. Had the fighters seen the two Tribe members on the ground, their decision would have been a lot different.

Both Vestara and Ahri were sweating profusely as they held out both hands towards the barrage, every ounce of concentration going into maintaining the Force-stasis around each glowing glob of metal. Holding a person in place was a lot different than trying to keep a wall of fast-moving super-heated metal slugs from streaming through the air. Another barrage would have finished them off with ease.

Reversing magnetization

Hurry

I know

Losing grip

A few of the bolts continued their path, bombarding the side of the transport. The weakened shields collapsed once more and a giant scorch mark appeared on the side of the transport. What seemed like kilometers away, the ground forces clashed in a chaotic meeting. Lasers and rockets were flying every which way. Several of

the armored vehicles were smoking wrecks from shoulder-mounted anti-vehicle weapons. Dust cloud puffed outwards, obscuring the battlefield.

How are you doing

There's a lot of these things you know

Switch off

No, I'm okay

They're coming around again

Almost there

Switch, I'll take care of it

Got it

The jets, seeing their attack continue on, decided to drop low for another strafing run. But as they set up, the rest of the frozen plasma rounds were released. Rather than continuing forward, the yellow bolts of metal reversed course. The jets, flying at full speed, never had a chance. One moment they were preparing to pull the trigger and blow the transport sky high. The next, the projectiles they had fired earlier were flying right back at them.

The remains of five more jets hit the desert ground a split second later—three to their own weapons, another two taken out by the transport's guns as they pulled up.

"Got any more tricks?" A winded Ahri rasped, looking over to his equally spent partner.

"Hope Vran landed in some place where he can cause damage and draws the others away," Vestara shrugged with one shoulder.

The burning remains of the fighters crackled in the arid land, smoke rising into the sky. Ahri cocked an eyebrow at Vestara. "Forgot how good a team we made."

"Not going to work," Vestara returned dryly. "I saw your ambition just as you saw mine. You're just waiting for the chance to stab me in the back."

"Then why don't you do something about it?" Ahri responded, mimicking her pose.

"I'm foolishly believing your brain will kick in and see that the galaxy will be better off under the Sith Empire I envision, not the one spoon-fed to you by Taalon and the others."

A noisy 'boom' drew both their attentions. The last walker had been flipped upside-down, its six legs flailing uselessly in the air. Smoldering wrecks of the rest of the garrison dotted the landscape, with the remainder fleeing as fast as they could. The surviving jets likewise pulled out, burning lines across the upper atmosphere as they fled.

Surveying the Tribe's soldiers, Vestara was pleased to see that they had suffered minimal losses. As for her Tyros, both had burns and shrapnel cuts and looked as tired as she felt, but were likewise alive. Aris was likewise among the living, though he was tending to a blaster-wound he had sustained in the fighting.

"Well," Ahri remarked. "At least now we know how this planet greets visitors."

DL-II-DL

Chief of Security for Boonta, Tadan, frowned in disbelief at the reports that filtered in. In the span of a single hour he had lost three of his rapid-response teams and nearly his entire air-force. The two shuttles that had broken through his orbital units and avoided the turbolasers on the ground had massacred the forces sent to investigate their presence. A third unit, sent to search for the initial shuttle said to hold a 'Sith Lord,' had reported contact with members of that shuttle before going completely dark.

And now Tadan was more than a little worried. He'd seen what Jedi could do during the wars. Though he might have dismissed the initial shuttle, when two more arrived and skillfully avoided state-of-the-art targeting systems and a whole orbital vanguard, it was far from a coincidence. Now, as he read the reports about enemies with red lightsabers, enemies that could flip over hover-tanks and rip apart people without touching them, he knew that he was facing more than one someone who had the power of the Jedi but none of the moral restraints.

That wasn't good.

"Dushatt," Tadan addressed his Gen'dai lieutenant without looking up from the reports.

"Yes boss?"

"Do we still have the frequency to that team of Jedi that was in the sector a year or two back?"

"I have to double check, but I think so."

"Check it now. In the meantime, pull all our people back. They're no match against a Jedi in open combat. I want automated turrets and mines laid out around any vital areas. If we have any marksmen, get them deployed to any place that gives them a clear shot. If these Force-users think they can come in and take this planet from us on my watch, they will regret it greatly."

"Boss, are you sure the Jedi team will want to help?" The Gen'dai said reluctantly. "The last time they stopped by we kind of told them to mind their own business and never stop by here again."

"They're Jedi," Tadan said gruffly. "They're suckers for people in need of help, big on forgiveness. But most importantly, they have lightsabers and can use the Force. If we have a dark Jedi problem, bringing in some light Jedi will help out."

"I've got the frequency," Dushatt held up his own datapad. "Sending you the information now"

"Excellent work."

"What do you want me to tell Captain Ty?" the Gen'dai asked, gesturing towards the ceiling.

"Have his ships stay out of sight on the other side of the planet. No sense losing them too. Not when we'll get Jedi to do the job."

The holo-screen activated and the image of a reddish-brown furred Bothan appeared. *"This is Jedi Knight Yaqeel Saa'vetu of the Jedi Order flagged vessel, Menagerie. To whom am I speaking with?"*

"Honorable Jedi Knight, this lowly and unworthy being is Tadan. I am Chief of Security of the planet of Boonta and I humbly request your assistance," Tadan said with as much exaggerated deference as he could manage.

The young woman on the other end didn't seem to buy his act. *"Cut the fodder, Chief of Security Tadan. I remember you from when my team was in the area. My team and I are currently in the middle of mediating a trade-pact between the Hutt Council and several nearby sectors for the benefit of over a dozen star-systems. Unless this is an emergency..."*

"Jedi Saa'vetu, we have dark Jedi invading our world as we speak! Three teams that we know of, reinforced by a Star Destroyer. Already many of my people are dead or suffering greatly and unless your team arrives, we won't be able to hold out much longer!"

"*Dark Jedi?*" The Bothan paused, taken aback. She tilted her head to the side, eyes widening. *"You...you are telling the truth."*

"I would never lie to a Jedi."

"You're lying now."

"I would never lie to a Jedi about something this important," Tadan winced.

"Very well. But it will be several days before we can get there. We're on Bothawui right now and will need to travel through Hutt Space."

"Just get here soon, my people are *dying*," Tadan stressed.

"We'll do our best, Jedi Knight Saa'vetu, out."

II-I-II-I-II

"Vran," Vestara greeted the hulking-mass of a Saber from the top of her team's purloined walker.

"Khai," Vran sneered in turn. His group hadn't been as fortunate, and their robes were caked with the yellow-red dirt that blew freely across the wide plains.

"Your people want a ride?" Vestara motioned to the walker. "It might be a tight fit, but some of you can ride atop. It'll beat walking."

Vran gave a curt nod, and his weary group of a half-dozen Sabers climbed onboard the scavenged six-legged walker.

"Nice ride," Saber Shirru remarked, settling atop the walker.

"Where'd you get it?"

"Figured we needed intel on this planet," Vestara said coolly as several of Vran's people headed for the walker's hatch. "Blowing up everything blow-upable seemed counter-productive to that. Anyone with a brain would know that."

The flash of rage and death-inflicting glare from Vran gave Vestara all the satisfaction she needed, regardless of how petty.

"Did you learn anything?" Keshiri Saber Marjaak harrumphed.

"My people captured several of his security forces alive as well as sliced the databank in this walker. This planet's leader is a war veteran," Vestara nodded. "And runs this place like his own personal army. And that Lord Dals managed to wipe out the force sent to investigate his location."

"You know where he is?"

"Yes."

"And we're going there?"

"No."

"Khai." Vran glowered.

Vestara looked over her shoulder to him. "The heat must be getting to you, Saber Vran. Go head in and get comfy in the atmosphere-controlled walker."

"Now that I am here, *I* am in command," Vran glared.

"Okay," Vestara shrugged, surprising everyone listening to the conversation. "Command away."

"We're going to Lord Dals' location."

"Okay. Where's that?"

"Khai," Vran repeated darkly, storming to her location, his large form casting a shadow over her seated one. "You will tell me where he is."

"Or you'll kill me?" Vestara arched an eyebrow at him. "I erased the

databanks of the walker after looking through them. The Tyros don't know, so don't bother. If you want to walk around this wasteland until the walker runs out of power too, be my guest."

Vestara found herself lifted into the air by an invisible grip on her throat.

"Enough, Vran," Ahri Raas, emerging from the walker, made a gesture that released Vestara. "We're currently outnumbered on a strange planet, looking for a treasonous Sith Lord, and you want to start killing off people who don't want to kill us?"

"No, Saber Raas, he's right," Vestara rubbed at her throat. "He's in command. It's his right to kill off subordinates."

Ahri's eyebrows rose. "Khai, you *want* to die?"

"No, but if Vran uses his superior intellect and deems my death necessary for the Tribe, than that is what I'll do," Vestara remarked.

An unhealthy tic appeared on Vran's forehead. "Khai, *where* are we headed if not Lord Dals' position?"

"To the capitol," Vestara answered.

"Why?"

"Saber Raas' idea. If we claim this planet for the Tribe, then we can use all of its resources, including their turbolaser defense grid and sensor network. Otherwise we'll just be chasing Lord Dals all over the wasteland without a single clue as to where we're going."

"There are only a handful of us," Ahri protested. He wasn't counting the silver-armored soldiers with them, or the ones they had left with their shuttle.

"Do the people of this planet know that?" Vestara arched an eyebrow. "As far as they're concerned, three assault shuttles for of dark Jedi just landed and wiped out any opposition. They also know we have a Star Destroyer. This is a planet where the strong rule the weak, something they are used to. It just so happens that for a stretch, the current rulers were the strongest. Now, we are."

II-II-II-II-II

"Sir," Dushatt said professionally, no panic in his voice despite the

news he was about to deliver.

Tadan looked up from his morning meal. "What is it?"

"Sir, there is a..." Dushatt checked his datapad. "A Corporal Aks'zonar here. He was picked up by Capitol Border Security. He was part of the forces sent out to investigate the dark Jedi shuttles and says the news he has is paramount to planetary security."

"The dark Jedi let him live?" Tadan frowned, wiping his mouth with a napkin and standing.

"He was captured and released by the dark Jedi to deliver his message. CBS checked him, he's clean."

"Well, let him in. Let's see what he has to say."

The Gen'dai gestured to someone in the doorway, and another Weequay entered the room.

"Corporal, you said you had a message of 'paramount' importance?" Tadan questioned.

"Yes sir, the dark Jedi wished me to relay their terms."

"Terms?"

"Of your surrender, sir," the Weequay said nervously, looking like he wanted to be anywhere else but in the room.

"Of *my* surrender?" Tadan said incredulously. "This is *my* planet. The only surrendering will be done by them. In a couple of days the Jedi will be here and end this little problem."

"Sir, they wanted me to tell you that unless you agreed to submit to the authority of the Tribe, they will kill you and hang your body from the rooftop. They are already in the city and said that they will only wait a few hours for your answer. That anything other than your complete obedience will unleash absolute devastation on this city. That they've already killed far greater numbers than what you have and will not hesitate to lay waste to an entire city to get their point across. Their words, not mine, sir."

"Those little..." Tadan took a moment to compose himself. "You did good, corporal. Consider your message delivered. Dismissed."

The corporal saluted sharply, then hurried from the room.

"Dushatt."

"Yes, sir?"

"Have CBS detain Corporal Ack'zonar."

"What charges, sir?"

"Property theft, abuse of public funds, treason, I don't care. We can't let word spread that the dark Jedi are in the city. It'll cause a panic and lower morale."

"And the information that the dark Jedi are already here?"

"The Jedi are coming soon, we just have to hold out until then... maybe tell the dark Jedi that we need more time."

"They don't strike me as the patient sort. And lying to the light Jedi didn't exactly work for us. I don't see how we'll be any more successful with the dark Jedi."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"The CBS know everyone in this city. Put out an alert for foreigners and we'll mobilize the local garrison. They might be dark Jedi but we have several thousand blasters in this city ready to fight and die for this planet."

"Do it. Tell Captain Ty that we'll need his detachment of marines to reinforce this city as well. And put a curfew on the city, I don't want any civilians being caught up in this mess. Take no chances with these dark Jedi."

"Understood."

Tadan pounded the table with his fist in frustration. "This is our planet, Dushatt! The Hutts have entrusted us with its security and protection, and no dark Jedi with delusions of grandeur is going to force us off it!"

DL-III-DL

"Don't you think taking a planet might be just a little bit beyond us, Khai?" Ahri sighed, taking a seat on the rooftop of a skyscraper with

his fellow Saber. "Even if we do take it, are you really going to let Vran be in charge of it?"

"No. Yes." Vestara answered in order, her eyes still closed in meditation. "Vran might be an unthinking lug, but he's a dangerous unthinking lug. Predictable only in that he'll kill anyone and destroy anything between him and his goal."

"You're in between him and his goal," Ahri pointed out. "And Vran is the giant Uvak that's going to squash you flat if you keep playing this game you seem intent on playing."

"The only reason why I'm near his jaws, Saber Raas, is because it allows me to put my *paraang* against his neck," Vestara said simply. She opened her eyes to look at him. "I know exactly what I am doing."

"Still the same old Khai," Ahri shook his head in disgust. "Arrogant and assuming."

"Still the same old Raas. Cowardly and sniveling."

"Rather be cowardly and alive than bold and dead," Ahri shrugged. "It's gotten me the ear of High Lord Taalon and the Grand Lord himself."

"I have the same."

"Only because they want to kill you...just like Vran come to think of it. You ever stop to think that your Sith Empire might actually need Sith in it to be an Empire? At the rate you're going, the entire Tribe will want to kill you sooner or later."

The rooftop door opened, and both Sabers turned to watch Tyro Airia approach. "Sabers, I believe we have our answer."

"The fool did not surrender?" Vestara inclined her head

"Of course not," Ahri laughed dryly. "He has an army."

"This Chief of Security Tadan has mobilized all security forces and placed a be-on-the-look-out for any foreigners in the city," Tyro Airia nodded. "In addition, security around the capitol building has been tripled and assault shuttles from their orbital garrison have deployed more soldiers."

"I told you we shouldn't have given that 'fool' any warning," Ahri said to Vestara.

The dark-hair Saber ignored him. "Tell the others to begin the next phase of the plan. This Tadan is a survivor of two great wars, according to those we captured. He would not be so foolish as to throw away the lives of his people after we took out his advance teams. He has something planned."

"I've sensed it too, a growing threat in the Force," Airia agreed.

"Something familiar at the same time," Vestara said contemplatively. "It's almost as if I've felt this before..."

"Saber Khai?"

Never mind," Vestara gestured back to the door. "Go. If this threat is as serious as it feels, we need every second we can spare."

"For the Tribe," Airia clasped a hand over her chest and went off to follow her orders.

Vestara stood and walked to the edge of the skyscraper's roof, looking out over the city. She could indeed see the increase in security patrols thanks to the flashing lights of their speeders as they roamed the almost empty night streets. She held up her electrobinoculars and focused it on the capitol building. Makeshift barricades and heavy vehicles were being set up. More six-legged walkers were patrolling the perimeter.

If this was a backwater world, Vestara briefly wondered what type of armaments not-so-backwater worlds would have.

The Sabers from Vran's group, including Vran himself, joined Vestara and Ahri on the rooftop. Each of them were holding an oblong-shaped droid with fins. Vestara collected her own droid from where she had left it on the roof, and Ahri did the same.

"Are you sure these droids are up to the task?" Saber Walusari said skeptically.

"Repulsor technology has advanced much from the time of our ancestors," Vestara inclined her head. "These ASN droids have the power to keep us aloft for the trip."

"I don't like this," Vran grumbled, needing only one large hand to

grasp the droid like a ball.

"It will work even for your weight, Saber Vran," Vestara said casually. "Of course, you could always walk to the capitol building and take on that army down there by yourself."

"Do you have to do that?" Ahri rubbed at his face in exasperation.

"Are the others in position?" Vestara looked to Airia.

"Yes, Saber Khai. Sabers Marjaak and Shirru, and Tyros Jesdan and Aris are standing by."

"Signal them," Vestara nodded once. "It's time to stop wasting our time on these primitive aliens and claim this planet for the Tribe."

Tyro Airia bowed her head and held up her comlink. After a few whispered words, she put the comlink away and nodded to Vestara. The team on the rooftop waited. And then the empty night was interrupted by a collection of explosions as a series of power substations went up in flames. An even larger fireball flared out into the sky as a power planet blew apart as well.

The effects on the ground were instantaneous. The street lights surrounding the capitol building went dead, as did anything that drew from the now ruined power plant. The security forces immediately began scrambling as alarms and shouts rang out. Large portions of them were standing about, gazing horror-struck at the hellish glow of the distant flames. And then the sound of blasterfire erupted from all around the city, stirring the others into action. In no time at all, a good portion of the garrison had dispersed to track down those responsible for the chaos.

"Go," Vestara ordered, activating her ASN courier droid. The droid's repulsors lifted her off the ground and into the air. "Ground Team, go to Phase Three."

The other Sabers and Tyro Airia followed her example, and soon the team was airborne. They ghosted through the darkened streets as fast as the droid could carry them, flying over security patrols and land-speeders who were focused on patrolling the ground. Their small profiles meant that sensor arrays—normally on the lookout for ships and vehicles with greater mass—didn't even register their profiles.

They swooped over and around buildings, the lack of lighting in the

street shielding their presence. After several long minutes hanging onto the courier droids, the team of five Sabers and one Tyro landed on the rooftop landing pad of the capitol building. The guards protecting the landing pad didn't stand a chance. One minute they were looking out at a city aglow from multiple fires, and the next, black-robed individuals were raining from the sky and cutting them down.

"Go ahead," Vestara stalked her own guard, gesturing to the comlink in the shaking Weequay's hand. His other hand held the slashed apart remains of his blaster. "Call us in."

The Weequay slowly brought the comlink up.

"Of course, if you do, it'll be the last thing in your miserable life that you'll have accomplished...getting the rest of your friends killed," Vestara said evenly, her masked figure shrouded in the red glow of her blade. "You don't want that, do you?"

"You'll...you'll let me live?" the guard said hesitantly but hopefully, his hand frozen half-way up.

"No, I can't risk the chance that you'll try to be a hero and go run off and warn the others. I can see it in your head, that's what you're going to do if I let you go, isn't it," Vestara shook her head. "Look on the bright side of things at least you won't be getting whoever responds to your call killed. Do you really want them to die for Security Chief Tadan? Did *you* want to die for him?"

Despair and fear radiated from the man at her words, and he sunk down to his knees, his hands falling to his side and the comlink rolling away. "Please, make it quick."

"Of course. What do you think I am, a bad guy? You won't even feel a thing." Vestara's saber hummed through the air and the man's head rolled away.

"You really have to stop playing with your food, Khai," Ahri drawled, as she rejoined the group.

"The Security Chief is holed up with the other leaders in a safe-room in this building's basement," Vestara ignored him as she relayed information she gleaned from the unfortunate guard's mind. "That peon was too low in the ranking to know where exactly, but it appears to be a command and control bunker of sorts."

"This building is thirty stories tall," Saber Walusari grumbled.

"Good, I was tired of sneaking around," Vran growled.

"They don't know we're here yet," Vestara shook her head. "Until this patrol misses their check-in we have some time. Let's go."

The rest of the group watched her as she made her way to the rooftop access hatch.

"Who died and left her in charge?" Saber Rulin said in disbelief.

"We're about to if we don't get moving," Ahri reminded. "If we're this surprised by her movements, imagine what's going on in the mind of this Tadan guy we'll be killing."

III-I-III-I-III

"We have the entire garrison searching for these so-called dark Jedi, Tadan. And this building is locked down."

"Not to mention the durasteel door over a dozen meters thick. We're safe here."

Tadan looked at his fellow planetary leaders—governors of the other provinces on the planet in his city for the Boonta Eve Classic—with a shake of his head. "Have any of you ever seen a Jedi in action? Or even bothered to look at the history of this galaxy to see what dark Jedi are capable of? All it took were two Sith Lords to bring down an entire order of Jedi! And a handful of Jedi held back billions of Killiks from invading barely a decade ago! Do you really think they'll let something like that door get in the way if they wanted to get in here?"

"Would you relax, Tadan," another chided. "In another dozen hours or so the Jedi will be here and everything will be wrapped up. You'll have stressed yourself out for nothing."

Just then the lights in the room went out, plunging the gathered leaders into darkness. The backup generators kicked in, leaving the room with emergency lighting only.

Tadan immediately brought up his comlink. "Dushatt, report!"

"Sir, the power substations and main generating plant have been hit! We have unconfirmed reports of blasterfire in several locations as well."

"Where, and which substations?"

"Sir...they hit the substations around the capitol building. But when they hit the main generators, it caused a cascading failure that blew out the other substations. The entire city is currently dark. As for blasterfire, reports put them at least two or three clicks out in each of the cardinal directions. We're currently mustering every available unit."

"And the security at the capitol building?"

"We have an entire division in place. Nothing is going to get through our people on the ground, and the anti-air batteries will blow away any approaching shuttle. As per your others, all our airborne vehicles in the city are grounded, so anything in the air has to be hostile."

Tadan sagged back into his chair in relief and watched the clock anxiously. As the minutes ticked by, an idea struck him and left him feeling very cold. Slowly, he held up his comlink. "Dushatt, when are the units due for their next check-in?"

"In another five minutes, sir. Do you want me to initiate a check-in now?"

"Do it. We can never be too careful." Tadan put his comlink down and rubbed at his forehead. His eyes darted to the bank of monitors that showed the images from the building's security system. Despite the brief power disruption, the backup generators had brought the security system back on line. He studied each monitor, ignoring the others. He didn't survive two galactic wars by being complacent. And though his position on Boonta had left him a bit rusty, his mind was still sharp. He clicked his comlink on again. "And run a system's check on our security system. Look for any sign that someone has sliced our systems."

"Understood."

Tadan drew his blaster and rested it on the durasteel table, his jaw clenching as he scanned the monitors vigilantly.

"Sir!"

"What?"

"We checked the security system like you ordered. We have an unauthorized access from the rooftop terminal, security feeds on the upper levels are being looped. We're purging the system now. Normal"

feed should kick in in a minute."

"Get men up there at once!" Tadan blurted, eyes widening. "Has the rooftop team checked in?"

"They reported all clear."

"Was it a voice you recognized?"

"Sir?"

"When they reported 'all clear,' was it a voice you recognized?" Tadan stressed.

There was a pause, and Dushatt grimly answered. *"I'll lead the fast action response team up myself."*

"Take every single person you can," Tadan practically yelled into his comlink. "And have the rest of the garrison fall back to this building. The blasterfire and explosions were just a division!"

"Issuing recall order now. We have them trapped, sir. There is no possible way they can get through the entire division."

"Did you at least find out how they got into the city?"

"They commandeered one of our walkers, sir. Used others they had captured from the advance unit to get by the gate guards."

"Dushatt, you are ordered to hold them back for as long as you can. Do not engage unless they try to get by you. These are dark Jedi. They have no qualms about killing."

"Understood, sir. It was an honor serving you."

III-II-III-II-III

Dushatt had lived for over a millennium, yet he was considered only in his adolescence. As a species that could easily hit seven thousand years old, that was to be expected. Yet, in the time he had lived, he had seen much, done much. His decision to become Tadan's right-hand man had been done for honor's sake. Tadan had saved his life during the Killik War, and he had followed Tadan to Boonta which the Hutts had gifted the veteran for his services.

One thing Dushatt hadn't done, however, was face Force-users in

battle. And, he mused—if he lived through the night—that would be one story that'd definitely imprint itself in his memory.

His towering figure swept into the colonnaded lobby of the capitol building flanked by several dozen of his best people. Like all things Hutt, the lobby was decked out in gleaming golden statues, sparkling gems, and other blatant displays of luxury. All polished to a new state of lustrous in preparation for the podracing tournament that would soon take place.

A spiral, marble staircase gilded with silver and festooned with a red carpet, led to the upper levels of the lobby. Dushatt ascended the staircase with heavy, plodding steps, pulling the mask of his helmet down as he did. The others followed, many survivors of conflicts big and small. All had looks of grim determination on their faces, but their eyes betrayed the same anxiousness the Gen'dai felt.

The top of the staircase led to a long corridor, currently pitch black due to the power-outage and it being considered non-essential to the operation of the building. The dark Jedi would have to go through the corridor if they wanted to get to the basement levels.

Dushatt gestured to those with him and they immediately took up positions across the width of the corridor. One group of soldiers went prone, the others bent on one knee, and the third stood above them, all with their blasters aimed. At the very wings of the formation, two E-web heavy repeater cannons were set up. Dushatt himself stood in the center of the formation and hefted a portable plasma cannon of his own.

"Orders are clear, terminate anything that tries to get by us," Dushatt announced. "No one is to get to the Security Chief or joint governors."

Those with him nodded in silent acknowledgment.

Over the comms, Dushatt could hear reinforcements arrive outside the building. A quick order had them pack the lobby with more blasters and heavy cannons.

The seconds stretched into minutes as the group bottlenecked the corridor. With the security systems barely functional, they had no idea when the dark Jedi would arrive.

And then a blood-curling scream caused the hair on those who had it, to stand on end.

"Help! You have to help me! They're killing everyone!" A pale, dark-haired human came scrambling out of the darkness, her eyes wide with terror. The discipline and surprise of the soldiers kept them from opening fire immediately as the young girl half stumbled, half crawled her way towards them. She had on a janitor's jumpsuit stained with blood, with geometric tattoos decorating her face. "Oh gods, the authorities! Please! They're killing everyone!"

"Over here, quickly!" A soldier to Dushatt's left called out. "We'll keep you safe!"

"Calm yourself. How many of them are there?" Dushatt said sternly as the human hyperventilated.

"A dozen...maybe more...I don't know, it all happened so fast," the girl breathed out frantically, shaking. "One moment we were cleaning and the next, the lights go out. Then *they* came. The rest of the cleaning crew, we didn't stand a chance! One of them held out his hand and my supervisor's head just caved in! Another had lightning fly out of his hand! It was awful!"

"It's okay, you're safe now," one of the soldiers said reassuringly. "We'll get justice for your crew."

"Corporal, take her out of the main entrance," Dushatt directed.

"They weren't that far behind," the girl stressed. "They're coming!"

"We'll be ready," the designated corporal said. "Come on, let's get you out of here."

Dushatt didn't pay the two another glance as they shuffled out of the corridor. Instead, he flicked the safety off his cannon and stood at the ready. The seconds began to tick by with unnerving slowness.

And then a powerful explosion shook the entire team, the shockwave knocking those standing off their feet. An explosion that had occurred behind them. Dushatt, unaffected thanks to his large size and enclosed armor system, looked over his shoulder.

He motioned to two of his men. "Check to see what happened."

Before either could even move, there was a tinkling sound of many metal objects bouncing off the stone floor. The entire unit glanced down, then paled as they got their answer. The metal objects were the pins for the fragmentation grenades carried by their people.

There were several dozen of them in all.

As the fear set in, the sound of lightsaber blades igniting down the corridor caused them to whip their attention back around. Three glowing red and two purple blades illuminated the hallway. Their bearers all wore masks that shielded their identity and dark robes that made them look as if they belonged to the shadows.

"Open fire!" Dushatt barked.

The barrage that went down the corridor would have annihilated a small army. The lightsabers sent most of that barrage flying right back at the shooters. The dark Jedi began to advance against the steadily decreasing storm of oncoming fire. The soldiers with Dushatt began to grow increasingly desperate.

And then the sound of one lightsaber activating behind them turned fear into panic. The back half of the group spun around to see the girl from earlier, now clad in the same black robes as the others, standing between them and the lobby.

"Behind us! Behind us!"

The girl gestured and blasters flew from the hands of those holding them. The dark Jedi on the other side of the attack continued to block the heavy fire, advancing without pause. Then, one of the dark Jedi gestured to the ceiling. The stone paneling had been cracked by the shockwave of the earlier blast, and with one motion, the dark Jedi brought it down on half of Dushatt's group. Another dark Jedi released streams of lightning that raked across the front ranks of the Boonta security force. A third, mountain-of-a-man, shrugged off several close-range blaster bolts as if they were mere annoyances and promptly swept his saber through the offending shooters.

Dushatt looked left and right as the dark Jedi decimated his best people with impunity. Though they had scored several hits on the dark Jedi, it only appeared to make them stronger, angrier. And then the mountain-of-a-man cut Dushatt's plasma cannon in half. Dushatt tossed aside the ruined weapon and pulled out the electrostaff that had been strapped to his back.

It was then that he became aware that he was the last one standing. And that all the dark Jedi were still among the living. Images of his thousand-plus years of living flashed through his mind before he smiled grimly. It looked like this was as far as he was going to go.

III-III-III-III-III

Vestara descended the chipped and charred lobby stairwell with the others behind her. The lobby itself was smeared red and darkened by dozens of individual craters. Having used the Force to remove the pins from the grenades of those at the perimeter and in the middle of the packed lobby, the detonation had claimed every single life. It had also collapsed one of the columns in the colonnade, preventing anyone else from using the main entrance of the building.

"Nice," Ahri whistled.

"We could have handled them," Vran scowled.

"Oh come on, can't you just be happy that you got to massacre that big guy? These guys were below you," Ahri chided the Saber.

"Her strategy was pathetic."

"But successful," Vestara needled back.

"You were just going to go and get help?" Saber Rulin said wryly.

"They were very helpful," Vestara nodded with a smirk of her own.

"You kept this one alive," Vran scowled at the corporal stunned-cuffed to the banister of the stairwell.

"He had good intentions," Vestara stepped between the large man and the helpless soldier. "Besides, we've already killed everyone else. Leaving this one alive will show that we can be merciful too."

"You....you won't get away with this!" the corporal said in a very shaking voice as every dark Jedi eyed him with murder in their eyes.

Vestara calmly walked up to the soldier, her head tilted back impetuously as she gazed down upon him. "Yes. Yes we will."

"There are others outside who will fight you," the corporal insisted.

Vestara drew her parang and placed the edge of it against the corporal's neck. "Do you wish to die today, or to live?"

The corporal visibly swallowed as he tried to pull away from his

blade. "Live."

"Then remain silent," Vestara said coolly. "A wise man knows when he is beaten. A stupid one dies trying to stop the inevitable. This planet will belong to the Tribe soon and we take care of our own. So you have a choice. Keep talking and die now, being of no use to anyone, especially your family. Stay silent and secretly plot against us, and then die when we learn of those plots. Or stay silent and support our goal of a Sith Empire and have you and your family be handsomely rewarded for your loyalty. That's not a hard choice now is it?"

The corporal shook his head.

"Now I noticed the insignia on your uniform. You're a part of Tadan's personal protection detail, am I right?"

The corporal nodded again.

"The location to his secure bunker please," Vestara continued in her falsely pleasant voice, using the Force just a little to get past the man's remaining inhibitions.

The corporal pointed to a far wall. "Hidden elevator. Voice activated. Everyone who has access is either dead or inside."

"You just let us worry about that," Vestara inclined her head. "Thank you for your cooperation, corporal."

Lightsabers were employed on the designated wall, and soon the infiltrating dark Jedi had cut a person-sized hole in it. On the other side was a deep turbolift shaft.

Vestara looked down the shaft, gave the corporal one last wave, and then dropped down. The others followed behind her. They used the Force to cushion their fall as they landed atop the turbolift several levels down. More lightsaber work cut a hole through the roof, and then through the lift door, and soon they were in a lone passageway leading to a very sturdy-looking door.

A beeping sound and warning from the Force had them activate their lightsabers just as a half-dozen turrets dropped from the ceiling and fired on them. The group made short work of the automated defenses, reflecting the blasterbolts shot their way back at the emplacements.

"Do we cut through this door too?" Saber Walusari asked mildly, gesturing with his purple blade at the door.

"If they are unreasonable, yes," Vestara took the time to look deliberately into the camera right next to the door. She removed her mask and stared at the operator on the opposite side. She switched to the more modern dialect of Basic, her tone Imperial ice. "We're coming in. Either you will remain among the living when we do, or not. The choice is yours."

At first, silence greeted her warning.

"You're big on giving choices today," Ahri noted.

"If we want this planet to support the Tribe, they have to decide for themselves," Vestara answered back in her native Keshiri Basic.

"And if they decide not to support us?" Vran glowered.

"Then we kill them until someone is willing to do so," Vestara returned casually. She glanced back to the door. "Now, I wonder what is taking them so long. The choice was a simple one."

Vestara was about to extend her senses to the living beings she sensed on the other side of the door when there was a loud metal clunk. More clunking sounds followed as the mag-seals on the door disengaged. Then, warning lights in the hallway began to flash as the door slowly slid back to reveal the secure control room.

Clustered inside were a few soldiers and over a dozen individuals who definitely weren't soldiers. There were also a couple of dead bodies with still-smoking blaster wounds.

"We surrender!" A human in disheveled, yet gaudy robes blurted out, hands in the air.

"Shut up, Darm," a large Weequay in military gear grumbled. "They know that already. I'm Security Chief Tadan of the Hu...."

Tadan's voice was caught in his throat, and his eyes bulged at the invisible pressure suddenly gripping it.

"Security Chief Tadan, I believe you are acquainted with our messenger already," Vestara said emotionlessly in clipped Imperial tones. "We gave you the terms required of your surrender. Told you what would happen if you refused them. Yes, you surrendered now."

But I believe the Hutts have a saying...too little too late, am I right?"

The Weequay flailed helplessly as he was lifted off the ground. The others in the room watched wide-eyed with fear, most backing away until they were pressed against the rows of computers and monitors that lined the walls of the bunker. Vestara made a sharp gesture with her hand, and the very audible sound of bones breaking was overly loud in the silent bunker. Another gesture, and Tadan's lifeless body was hurled across the room and onto the large table at its center.

"You will find that we of the Tribe do not appreciate those who waste our time," Vestara addressed the others. "What could have been a bloodless transition of power has now taken two days and many lives. As of this moment, this planet is no longer under Hutt control, it belongs to the Tribe of the Sith and the Sith Empire we are creating. If any of you object to this, do so now and you'll be allowed to leave this planet unharmed. Any attempts to waste more Tribe resources or time will end with this exact same result."

No one moved a muscle.

"Good, activate the planetary defense cannons and contact your orbital garrisons," Vestara directed. "Those in the ships above will get the same offer. A window of a few hours to leave, or a lifetime of reward and duty to the Sith Empire."

The others scrambled to obey.

"Saber Raas."

"Ves?"

Vestara shot him an annoyed look. "Once their orbital garrisons surrender, contact the *Dark Blade* and have them enter low orbit. Our search for Lord Dals has just gotten much easier."

"Errr....dark Jedi lady," one of the politicians in the room simpered.

Ahri smirked amusedly at Vestara, who glared at him in return before adopting a neutral expression and turning to the one addressing her. "Yes?"

"Ummm...you might want to know...Before you got here, Tadan contacted the Jedi about you," the politician weaseled, earning

several looks of shock and dismay from his compatriots. "The Jedi... they'll be here sometime tomorrow...well..." The man glanced at the clock. "Later today, at the earliest."

"How many Jedi?" Vestara questioned.

"I'm not sure...but the last time this particular Jedi vessel visited, they had six Jedi on board and a crew of over two-dozen."

"Six Jedi?"

"Yes. Three of their Knights and three Apprentices."

"Very good, Prime Minister," Vestara nodded approvingly.

The politician's eyes widened. "Ma'am?"

"I said it earlier, did I not? Serve the Tribe and be rewarded for your loyalty. You are now the Prime Minister of this planet, answerable to myself or any member of the Tribe. Congratulations."

"I...thank you...errr...what did you say your name was?"

"I didn't. All you need to know if asked is that this planet was single-handedly taken by the forces under the command of Saber Vran, loyal soldier of the Tribe of the Sith."

"I...yes..."

"Prime Minister," Vestara arched an eyebrow.

"Yes?"

"You might want to order the rest of the garrison to stand down," Vestara reminded, pointing at the monitors displaying the security forces surrounding the building.

"I'll need the others to give their own security codes," the new Prime Minister pointed to the surviving politicians. "It was a safeguard Tadan placed in case any one of us were compromised."

Vestara looked to the others. "Do you feel like assisting your new Prime Minister?"

The politicians looked at each other, before one by one, they stepped up and gave the authorization needed.

As they did, Vestara stepped over to Vran, looking up at his face. "Congratulations to *you*, Saber Vran, for taking this city and planet. The Force truly is kind for allowing me to see your skills first hand."

Vran's face was like stone as he stared down the smaller Saber. "What games are you playing, Khai?"

"No games," Vestara shook her head. "Your sister saw the benefits of working with me, is now in command of one of the few capital ships in the Sith Armada. You spared me on that walker, in return, I give this planet to you. High Lord Taalon will be most impressed with your abilities, no doubt that."

"And in return?" Vran's lips barely moved.

"In return, you support the Sith Empire I am striving to create. The Tribe rewards loyalty after all."

"That's it?"

"That's it. Do I have your support?"

"Do not cross me."

"The thought never crossed my mind."

"You have it."

"Very well, I believe the leaders of this planet await further instruction. I give that honor to you, Saber Vran, Conqueror of Boonta. The first of many planets that will fall to your prowess."

Vran straightened and his presence in the Force pulsed boldly as he stepped forward. The politicians all looked to him in respectful fear. "Your first orders from the Tribe. There is another group of our people somewhere on this planet. I want this planet searching for their location."

"And when we locate them?"

Vran studied Vestara's neutral expression for a moment, then turned back to the politicians. "Inform us. Failing that. They are to be... taken alive...if possible."

"We'll get word out right away."

"He is Saber Vran of the Tribe of the Sith," Vestara's brown eyes flashed dangerously. "You are to address him by his title or Lord Regent will suffice as well."

As one, the politicians bowed their heads towards Vran. "Yes, Lord Regent!"

It took a lifetime of training for Vestara to keep her face impassive, even as Ahri shot her a look from Vran's opposite side. Slowly, but surely, things were falling into place.

DL-Chapter End-DL

A\N: Last chapter will be up next week....

Big thanks to the gushing cap-lock anon reviewer. Your review definitely left warm glowy feelings after reading it. The funny thing about 'keeping with' Vestara's character is that I haven't read a single Legacy book (stopped after Swarm War because of the painful and forced plots) and have no idea how she's like in canon.

My entire basis of Vestara's character is from the few quotes on her wookieepedia page. This one in particular: 'We're on opposite sides of this thing, and maybe that makes us enemies. But we don't have to hate each other—that's a choice we make ourselves.'

And Jaina's assessment as well as Luke's response: 'You want me to take a Sith, whose trustworthiness seems to depend on the time of day, the season, and the phases of whatever moons happen to be nearby, with us on a potentially dangerous mission to the Sith homeworld?' Yes'.

Both form the backbone of my Vestara head-canon (the first quote even spawning the interlude story with her and Ben), and she developed naturally from there.

As requested, a small one-shot about how Doran and Kyrelle managed to make Tund a lot less fun for the members of the Tribe that followed them = D.

DL-(Forging Trouble)-DL

The independent freighter *Timeless Wanderer* cruised through hyperspace at a casual rate. A boxy *Venturer*-class freighter, its dark blue paintjob was every bit as unique as the two people inside it.

"Erilnar just fell," twenty-six year old Kyrelle Frieneil chirped lightly, changing the local HoloNet channel from news to entertainment. Her booted feet were resting on the steering column as she absently kept them on course. "You'd think that with two Jedi popping out of nowhere telling them an army of dark Jedi are about to invade, they'd have put up more of a fight."

"They didn't exactly seem to believe us," Jedi Master Doran Sarkin-Tainer remarked in turn, tossing a small, triangular device up and down in one hand. "I know *I* wouldn't believe me if I landed on Coruscant and started raving about how an army of dark Jedi were about to kill us all. I mean, Solo tried that and he got himself in political poodoo. We're just lucky they didn't arrest us or anything."

"Especially since we broke into their museum to steal that," Kyrelle said pointedly, using the Force to snag the triangular device the next time her master tossed it into the air.

"It was an impulse," Doran said, looking hurt.

Not fooled at all, Kyrelle arched an eyebrow. "And the fact that it's a Sith holocron didn't have anything to do with it?"

"I don't know what you mean," Doran summoned the device back to himself. "The placard at the museum said it was an ancient table ornament used by Rokur Gepta, the last Sorcerer of Tund."

Kyrelle shuddered at that. "I'm actually surprised the Centrans didn't activate any doomsday weapons or accidentally wipe themselves out fiddling with Gepta's stuff. Imagine what they could have done if they actually knew what a crazy dark sider's collection of the arcane could do."

"Which is why we're going to Tund to get rid of anything a group of crazy dark siders might make use of," Doran drawled.

"And we haven't destroyed that holocron, why?"

"It's not a Sith holocron."

"It's a pyramid, it's Sith."

"Okay, it's not the type of holocron that you activate and have some delusional dead guy or girl preach to you about the benefits of becoming a psychopath. It's a Command holocron. I've actually only seen two others in my life, and one of those two was already

broken."

"Calling it a 'Command' holocron doesn't make it sound any less Sithy. What does it command?"

"The one my mom and I saw on the ancient Sith world of Korriz was in a workshop and activated a whole Sith Alchemy station that produced Force-infused swords."

"That doesn't sound so bad."

"The Force-infused part of the swords drew upon the life force of anyone unfortunate enough to be sacrificed in the workshop," Doran deadpanned. "It also activated the automated defenses and cybernetic zombies."

"Cybernetic zombies?"

"Weeeeeell, they were probably regular cyborgs once, but their organic parts died off and the robot parts just continued to do whatever it is they were doing. Hence, cybernetic zombies."

"Why don't you ever have any happy, non-creepy stories?"

"Mom and I avoided being sacrificed and crammed into a dark side blade. Does that count?"

"What about the other Command holocron you saw?"

Doran's expression turned into a grimace. "It was on Malachor. You were taking a break from me and studying at the Yavin Praxeum at the time, visiting Fish-Girl and the like."

Kyrelle pinned Doran with a glare. "Really, master? You went to a known dark side nexus by yourself?!"

"It wasn't by myself. Some friends of mine on Lothal wanted my help in checking out a possible Sith building recently uncovered by a colonizing expedition."

"Stop right there," Kyrelle groaned, holding her face in her hands. "I can already guess how this whole 'checking out' went. You got there, the colonists were all under the control of something Sithy, the Sith building ended up being more than a building, and you and your friends ended up running for your lives about eighty percent of the time. The other twenty was spent coming up with ideas on the

fly and then blaming each other when those ideas didn't work out."

"See, you didn't miss anything after all."

"So when did the broken Command holocron come into play?"

"Oh, on the ancient Sith battle-cruiser," Doran said with a broad grin.

"This story just keeps getting worse the more you say. I know I'm going to regret it, but 'what ancient Sith battle-cruiser'."

"The one buried underground that me and the Wrens were chased to after the entire colony tried to eat us."

"You remember what Sannah said after our last visit? You're not supposed to go on these crazy adventures without someone looking after you. You're liable to drive the bad guys crazy with your stupidity and that's just cruel to the bad guys."

Doran chuckled and fondly patted Kyrelle on the shoulder. "Don't worry, I got out of that adventure alive too, Spirit Girl. Anyways, the broken Command holocron apparently activated that ancient Sith battle-cruiser. But since it was broken, all it did was short-circuit the reactors on start up."

"And you all ended up running for your lives, barely making it off the planet before the battle-cruiser went boom. And because you and the Wrens are such good guys, you actually managed to rescue the colonists somehow too."

"Exactly. So I just want to make sure that this holocron here doesn't activate any ancient Sith workshops or battle-cruisers."

"Now I see why you haven't told me this story before," Kyrelle deadpanned, shaking her head at him. "Just what am I going to do with you, Master?"

The *Timeless Wanderer* emerged from hyperspace over a rotating ball of brown and black.

"See, it's not my fault all my stories are of the creepy variety. The Sith never build stuff in places tourists want to go."

"So this is Tund, huh," Kyrelle ignored her master, though a smile played on her lips.

Traveling with him for the better part of a dozen years made her very familiar with his quirks and humor. It was never boring with Doran, and though some of the adventures she had had with him had definitely been life threatening, she wouldn't have traded that experience for anything. It was thanks to him and Sannah, that she had developed the self-confidence and focus necessary to become a full-fledged Jedi Knight. If anyone asked her, she would honestly say she was wholly in romantic love with the man who had given her life so much meaning.

Unfortunately or not, her feelings were mostly one-sided. She knew Doran loved her, but as a little sister. She even felt a tiny bit guilty that whenever they had visited Ossus in the past, she felt more like Doran's sister than his own flesh-and-blood sister. Theirs was definitely a complicated relationship.

"Holo-comm to Spirit Girl," Doran's voice broke through her reverie.

"What? Sorry, I was lost in thought."

"Scary place to be lost in," Doran said with faux seriousness.

"Ha, ha," Kyrelle returned dryly. "What did you want?"

"I was trying to impress you with my knowledge of the history of the planet," Doran sighed dramatically. He stretched out and pillowed his head in his hands. "But apparently there was something much more interesting going on in your head that trumped an ancient Sith world."

"Master, unless you're a complete dark side nerd, I think most everything would trump an ancient Sith world," Kyrelle rejoined with a laugh. She straightened in the pilot's seat and checked the systems. She then frowned. "Scans showing nothing living down there."

"Continuing the theme of Sith wiping out everything, including themselves," Doran nodded. "Looks like even the sectors Gepta set up are barren again."

"Without anyone maintaining them, the shield generators must have given out," Kyrelle flicked a few more switches. "Electromagnetic shielding is active. Where on this ball of dust do you want to go?"

"Give me a moment." Doran pulled out a datapad from his robes and began scrolling through the information.

"What's that?"

"List of the sites Gepta protected, compared to ancient records of known Sorcerers of Tund power bases. Okay...here, set a course for the following coordinates." Doran then rattled off a string of numbers. "It's going to be in the southern hemisphere. Look for a giant geological formation of some sort. Mountain, canyon, mesa, a raised form of dirt, you'll know it when you see it."

"Got it," Kyrelle steered the ship down into the upper atmosphere.

Suddenly a dazzling red light filled the cockpit.

"Whoa!" Doran quickly let go of the holocron as it began floating in the air.

"I take it the other two didn't do that?" Kyrelle glanced to the side at the light's source.

"Nope. Then again, no ancient Sith liked to be a copycat. They were all original in their own minds."

A beam of red light shot out of the holocron through the cockpit viewport of the freighter.

"Let me guess, I'm following the glowing red line?"

"What's the worst that can happen?"

Kyrelle just chuckled. "Suuuure, what can go wrong?"

"Exactly, we're prepared for anything," Doran finished with a laugh.

"That's enough tempting fate, Master," Kyrelle joined him, shaking with mirth as she guided their freighter after the glowing red line. "And there's your giant geological formation. A mesa."

"A mesa with a giant mess-a-ships around it," Doran quipped, though his expression became serious. "Get a scan of that graveyard around the mesa, would you?"

"Scanning," Kyrelle obeyed. Images began scrolling across the monitor and both Jedi took a moment to study them. "Wow, some of these ships are positively ancient. Look, this frigate has to be at least a thousand years old."

Doran watched grimly as the holo-projector displayed another ship. "And these two transports are Republic-era, pre-Ruusan reformation."

"What did your data pad say this place was?"

"It didn't," Doran shook his head. "Only that the Sorcerers of Tund considered this place holy ground."

"I see a Sith Temple coming up," Kyrelle frowned. "But I've never seen a temple made out of carved rocks before."

"Me neither."

The Command holocron pulsed brightly and an upper register of the giant pyramid atop the mesa retracted to reveal a landing pad. The holocron then became inert again and fell back into Doran's lap.

Doran carefully poked at the device with his finger, but it remained dark. "Well that was real helpful."

"Definitely made it easier for us." Kyrelle guided the shuttle onto the landing pad. The moment the shuttle touched down, the giant stones that had revealed the pad began to descend once more. It didn't unnerve Kyrelle in the slightest. She had lost count of the number of times her adventures with Doran had left them trapped inside a base, temple, ruin, derelict spacecraft, burning building, monument, or other places one could get trapped in. It was kind of standard for adventurers who constantly sought out political intrigue and ancient Force-related ruins along the Outer Rim. When the door to the hangar finally closed with a jarring thud, the entire hangar was plunged into darkness. The running lights from their freighter were the only source of light. "Well, let's see what this place really is."

"Definitely not your standard Sith temple," Doran agreed, moving with his apprentice back towards the landing ramp. They both paused to don rebreathers, personal shield generators, and mining helmets, checking the lights on the helmets, the frequency on their shield belts, and seal of the rebreathers before lowering the ramp. They were both experienced enough to know that sealed up places built by dark siders generally tended to have all sorts of nasties, not limited to airborne viruses, gasses, and other stuff you really didn't want to inhale. That and the fact that there was a weapon that destroyed anything organic loose on the planet meant that they were taking things extra carefully. "Remember, the power packs are

only good for five hours. Any longer and we go poof."

"Got it."

The two Jedi cautiously exited the ship. The hangar they were in was little more than an alcove carved into the rock that made up the giant pyramid. The only way in or out appeared to be a single stone door, a glimmering keystone glinting in the lights of their helmets. Both searched but found no visible control or means to open the door.

"Sith building, maybe use the Force to lift the door?"

"Sith building, the obvious solution will probably get us both killed," Doran shook his head. He pulled out the Command holocron and held it up. "Go on, do your thing."

The door remained close and the holocron remained inert.

"I command you to open," Doran dramatically thrust the holocron out at the door. Still, nothing happened. He scowled and then looked back to the door. "Open, pretty please?"

Kyrelle held her head. "You're bargaining with a door."

"You try it then," Doran held the command holocron out to her.

She placed a hand on the holocron to take it from him, but the second her fingertips touched the device, it lit up bright red. "Whoa!"

Kyrelle reflexively yanked her hand away, and the device deactivated again. Doran blinked, nonplussed, before flipping the holocron to her.

"Master!" Kyrelle squeaked as she caught it, flinching in anticipation of another bright flash of light. But nothing happened. She experimentally shook the device and then tried to turn it to see if its orientation had anything to do with its abilities. Nothing.

"Strange," Doran went to take it from her, and when his hand touched it, it lit up again. He gazed at the device, talking more to himself than his apprentice. "Of course, Master and Apprentice. But this place is centuries before Bane. I wonder if Bane came to his conclusions because of the influence of different dark side sects."

Kyrelle's hand shook as the holocron began to emit a pulsing red light similar to what it had done to open the hangar door. This time the heavy stone slab they were standing in front of retracted into the top of the frame. The hallway beyond continued on into the shadows, their helmet lights barely illuminating the way forward.

The two ventured forth, the holocron deactivating the moment they stepped over the threshold. When it did, the heavy stone door slid back down, the stone-on-stone grating echoing in the emptiness of the building.

"Watch your step," Doran murmured, pocketing the holocron.

Their trip down the hallway, however, was uneventful, their footsteps leaving impressions in the fine layer of dirt that had built up over the floor. The lights on their helmets swept back and forth, but didn't reveal anything of interest. It was only when they had reached the very end of the hallway and emerged out onto a balcony of some sort that the two were stunned. At first they saw nothing but pitch black, a massive cavern so great that their headlamps made no dent in its yawning expanse. Then the holocron pulsed and a giant pyramid in a correspondingly large cavern lit up in all red, casting a blood-red glow around the entire area.

"Oh...wow..." Kyrelle gaped.

Doran felt the build-up of Force energy from the holocron and grimaced. "Incoming Force-vision."

"Goody," Kyrelle groaned, quickly taking a seat next to her master.

The holocron pulsed once more and the two Jedi suddenly found themselves in another time. In this time the cavern was a hive of activity, lights mounted all around its perimeter shining brightly. The large pyramid in the cavern was gleaming with freshly polished metal, its exterior lighting highlighting the ancient Sith glyphs that decorated its paneling. Banners draped the walls as heavily armed legions and hordes of Force-sensitives in 'I'm a dark Jedi' black robes stood at attention. A lone figure strode out from the hallway behind Doran and Kyrelle and onto the balcony, his aura of hatred and rage shrouding him like a coat of armor. His outfit was similar to that of the dark Jedi below, but with several major differences. The trim of his robes was gold and the heavy metal chest plate he wore was similarly colored. A black helmet with gold inlay completed the ensemble of the man who was obviously in charge.

"My fellow Jen'jidai. The time has come to show the Jedi Order just how flawed and weak they have become. Remulus Dreyppa, XoXaan, Karness, and some of the others have agreed that now is the time to act. Now is the time to punish the Jedi Order for their arrogance. They should have killed us all at Corbos. They will come to regret not doing so. While Ajunta Pall, Xoxaan, and Broodica are content to stay hidden away, staining the name of the Jed'jidai, we will reclaim the glory and power that is befitting of people of our strength!"

A cheer went up from the masses below.

*"We will take the pinnacle of our efforts, and decimate the Jedi Temple at Coruscant. We will remind the cowards that follow Pall and the others what true power looks like. We will wipe the fleets of the Republic from the skies, turn this year into one that the Jedi will forever whisper about in dread. We are the Jen'jidai, and we **will** be victorious!"*

As the crowd roared in approval, the Sith was distracted when a holo-droid floated up to his level and a harried, red-skinned individual appeared. *"My Lord Jakal, I beg your forgiveness for this interruption, but forces commanded by Ajunta Pall attack in great numbers!"*

"What!?"

"That's not all, my lord. Lady Syn's forces are flanking us! They've already breached the subterranean levels! We cannot hold them off much..."

The transmission ended, a crackle of Sith Lightning the last thing seen.

"Those cowards!" Lord Jakal howled, summoning his weapon into his hand. At first glance it looked like a lightsaber with a hole-ridden metal ball as a pommel. But this particular Sith Lord was holding the weapon ball-side up. When he activated it, his grip made sense. The ball rose up out of the weapon on a crackling stream of plasma. Coming out of the ball were dozens of small lightsaber blades, turning the Sith Lord's weapon into a formidable light-morning-star. *"My servants! Ajunta Pal and Sorzus Syn attack! They fear that we are striking at the Jedi before we are truly ready! To arms! Show them our resolve! Show them our strength!"*

A distant wall exploded outwards at the end of his proclamation, ship-sized boulders tossed into the air and landing among the masses. Red lightsaber blades ignited all around and non-Force

users all shouldered their weapons and took aim. And then more walls exploded, an entire section of the floor gave way, and the forces of the rival Sith flooded into the room. More hostile dark Jedi flooded in from lower passageways, along with a great variety of Sith spawn. Almost immediately, Doran and Kyrelle could see that the forces of this Lord Jakal didn't stand a chance at all. Said dark lord was in the middle of the fray, swinging his deadly weapon around and wiping out multiple enemies at a time. He waded through the battlefield, carving a swath of death as he did, but also sustaining a mounting number of injuries.

Doran and Kyrelle watched the man enter the pyramid, the Force letting them follow his path up to the very command center. There he took off a necklace he had been wearing, a very familiar triangular device attached to the gold chain. As the battle raged on below, the dying Lord Jakal smiled a bloody smile, emitting a coughing laugh as he plugged the Command holocron into one of the computers. He flipped several switches and then sagged back against the console.

"We could have won," he wheezed to himself, his eyes falling shut and body going limp.

The pyramid began to shake violently, a deafening roar filling the cavern. And then a flash of blue energy crackled out from it, consuming the cavern and all those within. In the blink of an eye, those it touched were carbonized and turned to stone. Wherever they were, whoever they served, the blue wave of energy was unforgiving. It washed across the battlefield faster than most of the combatants could register its presence. Light fixtures were blown out, mechanized units that had been brought in were rendered inert—the crews similarly carbonized. Where before the din of war and combat could be heard, absolute silence followed. The pyramid itself stayed glowing red for several more seconds before it too went dark. As the last of the blue energy dissipated, the cavern was left a darkened, morbid tomb.

The vision ended, leaving Kyrelle and Doran a little bewildered as they slowly got to their feet. The shadowy sculptures the pyramid was illuminating below now took on a new, even creepier meaning.

"Yaaaah, we're not letting the Tribe get their hands on that ship," Kyrelle stretched, staring out at the pulsating pyramid in the center of the cavern.

"Definitely not," Doran agreed. "At least now we know why the

Sorcerers of Tund thought this was a holy place."

"Makes you wonder why, if they had the Command holocron, they didn't just use the ship."

"They were more mystics than military," Doran shook his head. "Most of them were so lost in contemplating the Force that this world ceased to be real."

"Our gain I guess. I'd hate to be the people to run into one of these things back during the heyday of the Sith."

"Me too," Doran looked over the edge of the balcony. "Drop looks survivable."

"I won't be too happy if it isn't," Kyrelle quipped, before leaping off and plunging through the near-darkness.

"You dead?" Doran called over the railing.

"Nope!"

Doran leaped over the railing after her, landing with the same soundless grace as the younger Jedi. They said nothing as they bypassed the frozen battle, the charcoal-ized faces of the still forms around them were twisted in an expression of eternal pain. Eventually they reached the pyramid, its front door sealed.

"Command holocron again?" Kyrelle held out her hand.

Doran started to reach for it, then paused when he noticed something atop the doorway. "Look, that's new."

"Definitely don't remember seeing that in the vision. Looks similar to the keystone that was over the door by the hangar."

"Yeah," Doran slowly withdrew the holocron.

And then the gem-like construct in the keystone lit up and several images flickered into view directly in front of the two Jedi. The decidedly non-human appearance of the three holograms was just as surprising as their choice of apparel.

"Massassi and two Kissai," Kyrelle slowly moved her hand away from her lightsaber. "These guys must be Sorcerers of Tund."

"Their crazy monk-like robes are kind of a giveaway."

"Show respect, acolytes! We are the Keepers of the Arcane! After millennia of waiting, have we fallen so far as to not recognize our betters?"

"Oh, there's been some mistake, we're not acolytes," Doran said cheerfully.

"You...you are not? But you have the Command holocron. You must be adepts or Sith Lords seeking the knowledge we protect, then."

"Nope."

"Servants of a Sith Lord?"

"Nope."

"Visiting adherents from another Sith sect?"

"Not even close."

"Then...what exactly are you if you are not the inheritors of our legacy?"

"Jedi."

If holograms could have heart-attacks, the three guardians would more than likely have had them. As it was, all three took a step back in disbelief. *"You lie! There is no possible way that a Jedi would step foot on these hallowed grounds!"*

"True," Doran nodded, relaxing the holograms. His next words practically gave them a second heart-attack. "That's why I have my apprentice with me. There's not just a Jedi on your hallowed grounds. There are *two* Jedi."

Kyrelle rolled her eyes and silently beseeched the Force for more patience. "Master, this place definitely isn't good for your mental health. First you plead with a door, and now you're trying to show up an automated security system."

"Good point. Sorry about that guys. Anyway, like you said, I have the Command holocron. Can my apprentice and I enter?"

The trio of holograms looked to one and other, before the Massassi

scowled and held out a hand. *"No Jedi will set foot in this sacred temple while we stand guard!"*

A bolt of Sith Lightning crackled out of his hand, proving that he was more than just a computer-generated image. Doran, however, caught the bolt in one hand and was soon tossing the extra energy up and down like a ball. The Massassi snarled and hurled another lightning bolt at Kyrelle. Kyrelle's saber snapped on and she batted the bolt out into the cavern where it proceeded to blow apart several of the carbonized statues.

"Being a holocron personality really does dial down your strength levels, doesn't it?" Doran quipped, letting the ball of lightning dissipate back into the Force. "Access to the temple please."

The Massassi appeared to pout for a moment before folding his arms in front of his chest and smiling smugly. *"It requires a blood price. One life to gain access. There is no getting around that requirement. Such is the way of the Sith, the way of our time-honored customs."*

"I figured as much," Doran reached into his robes and pulled out a small stasis cube. Inside was a womprat. "Other ancient Sith institutions all required something similar."

"Just what are you going to do with that vermin?"

"Blood price, right?" Doran arched an eyebrow at the hologram. "Means that I have to take a life to be granted access."

"Yes, you or your apprentice must die."

"Check your programming and safeguards. One life is one life. Doesn't matter how sentient that life is. Everything is connected by the Force, so logic follows, any life will do."

"You...you cannot be serious."

"That will never work."

"You dare make a mockery of our ancient practices, Jedi?"

"Yes I am, yes it will, yes I dare." Doran skewered the womprat in its cage with his lightsaber. He then calmly pocked the stasis cube again and clipped his lightsaber to his belt.

"*Ha! You see, it had no...*" the Kissai hologram trailed off as the large door behind him rumbled open. "*Oh.*"

"Thank you kind sirs. You are excellent guardians of knowledge."

"Master, just keep walking. You're gloating to holograms again."

As before, the door closed behind them, Kyrelle nudged Doran. "So, what's next?"

"I figured we'd just go room to room destroying all that arcane knowledge stuff. No one needs to hear the insane ramblings of people who believed themselves so important that they needed to make their own holocrons."

"It's a pity all that knowledge will just be wasted though. I mean, you saw that vision, right? This place has been standing since the time of Ajunta Pall, one of the first Lords of the Sith! Imagine the secrets that they and the Sorcerers must have unlocked."

"We *could* try to bring as many holocrons and data crystals as we can, bury them in a safe place, and hope no intrepid dark siders discovers them."

"Destroying them does seem safer," Kyrelle agreed reluctantly. "But can we just look them over. Maybe they might contain the cure to some ancient Sith Force attack or something."

"We have...whoa, two hours left before our shield belts go out," Doran said after checking the gauge on his belt. "That Force vision must have been more time-consuming than I thought. I think that after several thousand years, we'll need more than that to go through what they've collected."

"Okay, but how are we going to deal with the ancient Sith spaceship then?"

"When we reach the command platform, I'll think of something."

"So we're pretty much going to do what we always do, wing it?"

"You expected anything more?"

"Where'd the fun be in that," Kyrelle grinned impishly.

They wandered the hallways of the ship, slightly gobsmacked at the

number of datacrystals, datacrons, and holocrons they found. It seemed that the Sorcerers of Tund had converted the ship into an archive of knowledge, with every room containing shelves practically overflowing with metal tomes and data-storage devices.

"We're going to need more than two hours to destroy all of these," Kyrelle panted, her saber glowing after she sliced a person-sized holocron in two. They had only made it through a couple of rooms, the amount of things needing vaporizing just too many.

"Yeah, I thought that too," Doran grimaced. "Let's see if there's a failsafe or something in the command console. Sith like to be possessive and if this place was about to fall to an enemy, they'd want to keep this knowledge out of their hands."

They ascended through the ship, peering into the various rooms they passed and taking note of the contents. Some rooms held ancient Sith weapons, others held various beakers filled with different colored fluids. All made the decision to reach the place before the Tribe all the more correct.

Once on the command platform, the Command holocron in Doran's robes began to glow brightly once more. Doran took the device out and watched as it floated up from his hand.

"Great, I guess all we have to do is plug it in and..."

"Master..." Kyrelle cut off his musings and tugged on his sleeve.

Doran looked up and saw the pale blue apparition of the long-dead Sith Lord Jakal. From the way the Force was flaring around this image, both Jedi immediately knew that it was no hologram.

"After all these years, it is the Jedi who have come to reclaim the pinnacle of my greatness," the ghost said with a wry shake of his head. The word 'greatness' was said mockingly, as if he was disgusted by it. *"It wasn't enough for your kind to banish us, let us wallow on these miserable excuses for worlds ruling over primitives. Now you have come to destroy this monument and erase the last of my memory forever."*

"What is your name, honored one?" Doran asked softly. He sensed no danger from the ghost, only a deep, almost painful regret, sorrow.

The ghost shook his head as it strode to the edge of the platform to

gaze out at the cavern. *"I am no honored one. I do not even deserve the title Lord. For thousands of years I have been bound here, worshipped by those lost in their own quest for power. I have watched those here waste away, seen the times change over and over yet everything remain the same. Were we so deluded in thinking we could rule an Empire that spanned the stars? That we were stronger than the sum of the presence of an entire galaxy? We were so proud once, so strong. Now look at us."*

The entire cavern below appeared to glow a bright blue light, and Doran and Kyrelle struggled to keep themselves from reacting as the blue light solidified into many separate sources. Each glowing form emerged from the carbonized army to reveal an army of Force-ghosts. All the ghosts stared up at the Sith Lord, remaining where they were. Kyrelle's hand became ethereal and she gently placed it on the form Sith Lord's shoulder. "We see you all, honored one. We see you all and will remember you."

Startled by her touch, the Sith Lord turned to her. *"You are not like the Jedi of my time."*

"The Jedi of your time, like the Sith of your time, have passed on into memory," Kyrelle replied tenderly. "Since you fell here, Jedi, just like the Sith, have risen and fallen countless times."

"A cycle of darkness and light," the Sith Lord sighed, hanging his head. *"The times change, but the people and beliefs never do. It was the hubris of us, the Exiled, that started it all."*

"It is still not too late," Doran stepped up to stand on Jakal's opposite side. "It is never too late. If the Jedi of your time is anything like the Jedi today, they'll still forgive you and all those you led."

"We are not deserving of such forgiveness. We who thought we knew better. We who are responsible for the deaths of so many all these thousands of years."

"Maybe that is your punishment then," Doran gestured to the mass of ghosts. "Knowing that you are not deserving of forgiveness, yet receiving it anyways."

"Let go of your regret, of your pain, honored one," Kyrelle nodded, sympathetically rubbing the ghost's back. "You and yours have suffered long enough. My master and I will ensure your memory stays alive."

"I...that is more than a misguided fool like me can ever hope to have. Please, why do you still call me 'honored one'?"

"Because that is what you are," Doran voiced. "Jedi like ourselves honor people like you because you came before us, dared to blaze a trail that lesser people would not have walked. If it wasn't you and the other Exiled, then it would have been someone else to take up the mantel. Dark side, light side, the two are in balance. Where there are Jedi, there must be Sith. You and the other Exiled were among the first to realize this on some level, have become lessons that teach not just dark Jedi, but Jedi as well, on the importance of a balanced Force. It is because of that you are honored. Your bravery, your strength, your desire to transcend Jedi teachings, no matter how misguided, was all the will of the Force. As my apprentice said. It is time to stop regretting what happened, time to rejoin those you left so long ago."

The Sith Lord was silent for a very long moment, before he then looked upwards, almost wonderingly. *"I...I see my master. Master, please, I am sorry for everything. It has been so long, but now I see...No! It is not your failing master, but my own. Please, do not blame yourself. I have missed you and the others so much..."*

"Honored one," Kyrelle whispered, a small smile on her face as the ghost began to walk out onto thin air. "Before you rejoin the others, what would you have my master and I do with this place?"

The former Sith Lord looked to Kyrelle, his dark Jedi garb fading away to be replaced by standard Jedi robes. *"I think you know, brave Jedi. Please, destroy it. Do not let others make the same mistakes I have made."*

"There is much knowledge here," Doran pointed to the lower levels. "And my apprentice and I will not be shielded from the ancient weapon that has ravaged the planet for much longer."

The ghost bowed his head. *"Then let me do my part in making things right. It is the least I can do."*

The ghost raised a hand, and the army of ghosts surged forward, flooding the ancient Sith warship. After several long seconds, the mass of ghosts appeared up on the command deck, crowding all around Doran and Kyrelle.

"It is done."

"We thank you," Kyrelle bowed her head.

"Take the passageway there," the former Sith Lord pointed towards a hatch in the floor. "It will take you to the power regulators. Two Jedi as resourceful as yourselves should make short work of them."

"Again, we thank you," Doran nodded solemnly. "Rest now, Jedi Jakal. Your time is finally over."

The ghost looked upwards again, a wry smile appearing as he nodded. *"And so it is."*

The former Sith Lord vanished, and then shortly after, a gentle breeze washed over the command platform as the other ghosts followed.

"This is so why I stay with you, Master," Kyrelle whispered, closing her eyes and clasping her hands together in silent prayer. *"Rest easy, all of you."*

Doran waited until her prayer was finished before fondly nudging her. "I thought you stayed with me because we got to run around and blow stuff up."

"Well, that too," Kyrelle beamed. "Come on, we have an ancient Sith ship to blow up!"

"Wait," Doran freed his hand from her eager tugging.

"Doran?"

"Weeeellll, I just thought of a good team building exercise for which ever Tribe member is book-smart enough to read about this place and come here."

"Doran," Kyrelle sighed. "Can't we just blow this place up?"

"We'll let the Tribe do it for us," Doran shook his head. "Besides, all the knowledge this place contained was destroyed, this is just like bonus. I'll fiddle with the defensive systems of this place, make it not-so-lethal to make it fun, and then cause some type of power-overload when they start this place up. That's where the regulators will come in.

"At least you aren't bragging about outsmarting holograms now," Kyrelle rubbed her face. "Fine, go ahead."

"You're the best," Doran kissed the top of her head and then went over to the control console. He placed the Command holocron into the computer, and it powered up with a pleasant hum. His hands flew across the controls as he noted the various screens. "Ooo, this place has a ray-shield defensive grid in the event of power failure. Let's switch those on. Changing parameters for that killer pulse Jakal used, apparently if you didn't have the holocron, it zapped your ship from the sky. Check, not-so-lethal now. Close a few doors, open a few others. Hmmm, a system labeled 'soul extractor,' I think we'll pass on that. What's next? Right, holo-recorder, holo-recorder. Okay, here it is."

"Master," Kyrelle groaned. "I thought you told me to never make Sith mad."

"Please, you've seen the Tribe, they're like the country-yokel Sith cousins of Vader and Palpatine. Now shush, I have to record a message for them."

"Oh boy."

"Greetings to whichever Master, Lord, Saber, Tyro, unlucky..."

"Master, just get on with it!"

"Okay, fine. So you figured out that teamwork was needed to get to the computers and turn off the ray shields. Well done. Unfortunately for you, reactivating the power to this place triggered a counter-down. To what you might be wondering? Well, my apprentice and I accidentally stabbed the power-stabilizers of this battle -cruiser's main reactor with our lightsabers. Powering up the pyramid again will have caused a cascading failure in the subroutines that limit the energy flow. You have, maybe ten minutes to get clear of the blast zone. Never seen one of these go up before, so not sure what the radius is going to be. Sorry about that, but I couldn't have you zooming around the galaxy in a ship with Force-controlled weaponry."

Doran ended the recording with a broad grin and removed the holocron from its slot. The computers immediately went dark and the flooring began to crackle. "Watch your step, the ray shields are active."

"We're still in the middle of the floor," Kyrelle arched an eyebrow.

"Here," Doran floated her over the floor and to the hatch. "Have fun

slashing things!"

"Hey you said 'my apprentice and I' slashed the power stabilizers," Kyrelle protested.

"I'm the master here. Get to work, apprentice."

"I am so telling Sannah on you!" Kyrelle grumped.

"Fine, float me over too."

The two Jedi descended down a ladder and into a room full of pretty important-looking machinery. The two exchanged broad grins and activated their lightsabers. Within minutes, the pretty important-looking machines were sizzling and slashed apart pieces of scrap metal.

"It really is too bad we can't stay and watch their reactions," Doran said regretfully.

"Master."

"Yes?"

"Who's the best apprentice in the whole wide galaxy?" Kyrelle smirked. She reached into the pockets of *her* robes and pulled out what looked like a sheet of flimsiplast. Attached to the sheet, however, were dot-sized spy-cameras. "Some people carry womprats in their pockets, I carry spy-cams!"

"Kyrelle, I love you and if you weren't my apprentice, I'd kiss you!" Doran laughed, picking her up and swinging her around.

"Put me down you big idiot!" Kyrelle giggled. When he did as she demanded, she tugged the collar of his Jedi tunic to pull him down slightly. "So what do I have to do to not be your apprentice anymore?"

Doran froze comically at that, his eyes bulging and his jaw dropping. "I...you...you and me..."

"I like the sound of that so far," Kyrelle grinned impishly, though her heart was pounding in her chest as she surprised herself with her own daring. "Go on."

"I...I didn't know you felt that way. I mean, I kind of knew. Well,

not really. But I suspected after...well, that doesn't really matter," Doran babbled.

"Now you know for sure. You still haven't answered my question."

"Traditionally, a Jedi Knight goes through some trials, and then faces a board of Jedi Masters who ask the apprentice why he or she wants to become a Jedi Master."

"Is kissing you a valid reason?" Kyrelle raised an eyebrow in challenge. She released his tunic and folded her arms in front of her chest.

Doran faltered even further as he stumbled back against the wall of the corridor. "I'm flattered, Rells. Really. But are you sure you just aren't mistaking..."

"Doran, my dear master and closest friend. Finish that sentence and there won't be enough left of you to feed to the fishes. And if Sannah were here, she'd help. I am perfectly aware of my feelings. You were the one who taught me how to get in touch with them after all. I'm not a little girl anymore. But I'll understand if you can't return my feelings. It'll be okay." Kyrelle did her best to keep her cocky smirk on her face, even as her heart threatened to beat right out of her chest.

Her last statement was definitely the worst lie she had ever told. She immediately regretted confessing in the middle of an ancient Sith battle-cruiser. The last thing she wanted was to make the rest of her travels with Doran awkward. It was why she had abstained from telling him when she had first realized she was in love with him at sixteen.

Doran ran a hand over his face, obviously still very much in shock. "It's not that, Rells. I mean, I care about you a lot, tons. You adventuring with me is what makes the adventuring fun. But I've known you since you were twelve, thought of you as the little sister I never really got to know."

"Like I said, it's okay," Kyrelle's smile became brittle.

"No, it's not okay," Doran groaned in frustration, spinning away from her and shaking his head.

"Look, if I just made things super awkward, you can drop me off at the nearest starport and you won't have to see me again," Kyrelle

backpedalled frantically as her stomach twisted into a painful knot. "Or better yet, we can just drop the whole thing, put up the spy-cameras and have a laugh together when the Tribe stumble onto this place. That's sounds like a great idea, right? Just Adventure Boy and Spirit Girl like usual. Forget I said anything at all, blame it on this Sith ship. But if you are going to get rid of me, you definitely need someone else to watch your back. You know, to make adventuring fun for you and...mmmmphf!"

Kyrelle's panicked spew was cut off by Doran pressing his lips to hers. Her eyes widened for a fraction of a second as her mind registered what was happening, and then in that next fraction of a second a command was sent to her arms to grab him in case he tried to pull away. Before that second was up, she was pressing her lips back against his with just as much fervor, a tribe of Ewoks deciding to party in her now short-circuited brain.

Kyrelle was panting for air when their lips parted, mouthing 'wow' softly to herself and resting her forehead against his chest for a moment before looking up at him uncertainly. "What happened to not kissing your apprentice?"

Doran rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "I'm the ranking Jedi Master in the sector, you're field promoted to master until I can get a few other masters to approve and make it permanent. I found your reason for wanting to be a Jedi Master more than adequate, though I do suggest you alter it for the others."

The younger Jedi's face brightened and she let out an elated laugh as she threw herself forward and hugged Doran tightly. "Will do, Master Sarkin-Tainer. It's funny, I never thought I'd have my first real kiss on an antique, decommissioned, Sith spaceship."

"Oh, where did you have in mind?"

Kyrelle began listing location, ticking off a finger for each one. "Sith temple ruins, abandoned Jedi hide-away, derelict spacecraft, prison, execution show. The place kind of varied depending on our adventure at the time."

"Execution show?"

"You know, some corrupt politician thinks he got the better of the both of us and has us hauled into an arena to fight to the death or something. We share this mind-blowing kiss before heading off to liberate the planet from his corrupt-ness."

Doran laughed and draped an arm around Kyrelle. The female Jedi promptly reached up and took his hand in one of her own. Doran pulled her close and the two began to walk through the ruined machinery. "Let's go put up those cameras, Spirit Girl."

"Be sure to pick up popcorn in the next system that has some," she chimed back, practically glowing with happiness. "By the way, where is the next system?"

"I figured that after Centrality, Hutt Space would be the Tribe's next target. It's small, disorganized, and easy pickings. We go in, warn the Hutts about the Tribe, and then swing by Ossus to let my little sister know we're alive. Simple."

Kyrelle patted his hand almost patronizingly. "Master, with you, nothing is simple."

DL-Side Story End-DL

A\N 2: Seee this is what you get when you have my already overloaded-with-plotbunnies mind fed another plot bunny! I already have this post-Forging the Future/aDA series bopping around detailing Kyrelle and Doran's adventures, but have too much on my plate as it is. No more feeding the rabid plot bunnies!

6. Chapter 6

Chapter 6

DL-I-DL

Bothan Jedi Knight Yaqeel Saav'etu had seen a darker side of the galaxy that most people didn't know existed. Had lost close friends in war, had lost family to politics. Her own homeworld had banished her and many others after the True Victory party obtained a majority in the Bothan Council. The True Victory Party, just thinking of that name left a bitter taste at the back of her mouth. Determined to exterminate the Yuuzhan Vong race to the very last, Bothawui had become increasingly xenophobic and isolated after the Killik War. Anyone who disagreed with the Bothan Council's thinking were put into re-education camps or were banished with all property confiscated. There was nothing like fighting for the safety of everyone on your homeworld, and then being kicked off said homeworld by those same people.

Her refuge from the storm that was life were the friends she had left and the ship she called her own. The *Menagerie*—a gift to her by the leader of the Bothan Exile Government, Asyr Sei'lar for services rendered—was a Bothan-made assault frigate. Very useful given that she and her crew often conducted Jedi business in the most lawless parts of the galaxy. Pirates didn't really care that you were Jedi, but they did care about the five turbolaser batteries and four missile tubes on her ship.

She flexed one arm, watching with detachment as the Yuuzhan Vong biots that held it together flexed along with it. She had lost the arm during the Yuuzhan Vong War, and though the Jedi healers at the time had been able to reattach it, she had never regained full functionality. That is until a Yuuzhan Vong shaper working with Asyr Sei'lar offered a solution. The tissue of her right arm was now interlaced with a living Yuuzhan Vong graft that had not only restored her arm to its pre-dismembered state, but had enhanced its strength as well.

"Having trouble with the arm?" The other Bothan Jedi and fellow exile on the ship, Kolir Hu'lya, approached. Yaqeel knew that Kolir was a GAG agent reporting back to Denon the state of the Outer Rim and lawless areas of space. It wasn't like the tan-furred Bothan was hiding it or anything. She wore a GAG-issued armored jumpsuit and had no qualms about using GAG intelligence assets for their

mission if need be. "It's been a while since we've had a shaper check up on it."

"No. Just thinking about things I'd rather forget."

"I know the feeling," Kolir Hu'lya said wanly. "Still can't believe we had to shoot our way off Bothawui and it's been close to five years already."

"Was there something up?" Yaqeel asked.

"We'll be approaching Boonta in a couple of hours," Kolir answered. "But both Barv and Jun say they have a bad feeling about the place."

"Tadan wasn't lying to me when he said they had dark Jedi on the world."

"I know. That's the problem. Out of all of us, Jun is the only one who's actually faced one in combat," Kolir addressed the other Jedi. "Both you and Barv faced those Slayers back in the Vong War. The closest I ever got to fighting anyone in actual lightsaber combat was the GAG training regiment those Solos came up with. And you can bet our apprentices are no way prepared for this either."

"I don't like it any more than you do," Yaqeel shook her head. "When we were last there, Tadan was just putting the finishing touches on his planetary defense grid. It's more than likely operational now. Add that to the fact we don't know the numbers we're facing, or who these guys are...But we're Jedi. Diving head-first into something without a plan is practically textbook for us. We can't let these dark Jedi escape and disrupt other worlds."

"Have you thought about negotiating with them?" Kolir said a bit too lightly.

Yaqeel arched an eyebrow at her fellow Bothan. "Negotiating?"

"They technically haven't done *anything* against the Galactic Alliance or Jedi Order."

"Kolir," Yaqeel felt a massive headache coming on. "Why exactly are you on this ship again?"

"So I can do Jedi things in places that need them," Kolir answered with a wry smile.

"And the truth?"

"Solo's orders," Kolir answered evenly. Even though Anakin Solo had stepped down from his post as Director of the GAG, most everyone continued to carry out any standing orders they had been given. "Ever since the Skywalker kid and his friends were attacked by the dark Jedi on Formos, Solo's had people on the lookout for any sign of them. Given what Skywalker and the others reported, Anakin believes that the group that interrupted Skywalker's mission was different from the one that attacked him and Jacen a few years before that."

"Different? How?"

"Hence the negotiation."

"They're dark Jedi, we're Jedi sworn to stop their return to the galaxy."

"It goes back to my problem. We're not a combat team Yaqeel. Our specialty has always been negotiation, tactics, and politics. Sure we can fight if it comes down to it, but you've read the same reports. These dark Jedi can fight whether it comes down to it or not. And there's a lot more of them than us. Skywalker and his friends were lucky to get off that planet alive."

The door to the briefing room opened and the last Jedi Knight in the team, Ramoan Bazel Warv, entered with the three apprentices in tow. Though the apprentices weren't officially paired up with any of the knights—with barely a decade separating the group in terms of age they were all learning from each other—the trio of apprentice had naturally gravitated towards one of the older Jedi.

"Master," Melari Ruxon, 'Yaqeel's' Duros apprentice, acknowledged her master with a bob of her head.

"Sorry we're late," Cathar apprentice Jun Rasi Tuum bowed his head towards Kolir.

"It's alright," Kolir waved him off. "We were actually just talking about you."

The last apprentice, a Jenet male named Reeqo Swen, took his place next to Barv at the table.

Yaqeel waited for a moment before addressing them. "Okay, listen

up and listen closely. This mission won't be like any of the others we've been on. These won't be some Force-forsaken scavengers or pirates we'll be facing. Nor will they be Hutt militia or Corporate Sector goons. There is a reason why dark Jedi keep popping up even when this galaxy is being protected by the strongest of Jedi. They have every bit of our skill, but unlike us, are not limited in their morals. Jedi Apprentice Rasi Tuum here has faced some of them in the past. Jun?"

"The dark Jedi I faced were good, very good," Jun stressed seriously. "They would have had me and Skywalker and the others if the planet's local militia hadn't come to our aid. From the style of their fighting, their stance was designed to fight fellow lightsaber users. They also used the Force continuously during our fight, so be ready for that too. Lastly, they didn't seem to care at all if one of their number was killed, so don't count on the shock of a death to provide an opening. Of course, that all only applies if these are the same guys Fishsticks, Chatterbox, Ben, Kani, and I faced."

"And if they're not?" Reeqo asked, blinking.

Jun laughed darkly. "Then this galaxy is in a whole bunch of trouble because it means that there's more than one group of dark Jedi running about."

At that, Yaqeel shot a sharp look at Kolir. The tan-furred Bothan tilted her head back at Yaqeel in silent acknowledgment.

Whatever was going to happen when they reached Boonta was not something they could possibly prepare for.

DL-II-DL

"We have them."

Vestara felt Vran approach from behind, but made no move to step away from the balcony's edge. The transition of power had gone pretty much as she had predicted. On a planet where the strength and brutality of the Hutts set the law, the natives had been more than willing to surrender to someone whose own strength and brutality surpassed even that. Even now, crews were hard at work repairing the capitol city, while the military units had been mustered to track down Lord Dals and his people.

"Lord Dals?"

"Yes," Vran said, coming to stand next to her and gazing out at the city. "Recon units have him in a quadrant of the Boonta Scrapyard. His people are trying to put together a ship."

"Innovative," Vestara remarked mildly.

"You're the one that wants him alive," Vran said gruffly, folding his arms in front of his chest. "Go get him and bring him back here."

"Yes, Saber Vran," Vestara said with just a hint of sarcasm. "I appreciate this opportunity."

"Khai."

Vestara stopped at the balcony door. "Vran?"

"After he sides with us, what do you plan to do next?"

"That confident he'll agree to my vision of a Sith Empire?"

"No. But the alternative is his death. Death, or power, it is not a hard choice. And you did not answer my question."

"You were with me on some of our scavenging missions," Vestara continued to face away from him. "You know that Hutt Space is just as isolated and disorganized as Centrality. The Tribe will give these lesser races a purpose, and the Keshiri will be happy that there are actually others lower than they are in our society."

"You intend to claim all of Hutt Space for the Tribe?" Vran's voice was incredulous.

Vestara looked over her shoulder at him, her eyes glimmering. "That is exactly what I am going to do, Lord Regent."

"The Hutts have a fleet of vessels, armies of soldiers. We have only one Star Destroyer. We lost most our fighters taking a single planet. High Lord Taalon would never sanction any reinforcements on your behalf."

"Which is why Kaara is in charge of the *Dark Blade* and you are in command of the ground forces. I won't be asking High Lord Taalon for anything. I am sure that the conquerors of Boonta, Renatasia, and Dilonexa, heroes of the Battle for Erilnar, can have any force they wish so long as they claim more worlds for Grand Lord Vol's Sith Empire."

"More worlds for the Tribe," Vran corrected.

Vestara resumed her exit, dismissively waving a hand. "That's what I meant, of course. I'll be back shortly, Lord Regent. Try not to murder those governors we kept alive, no matter how demanding or whiny they become."

It was a short trip to the speeder hangar, and she didn't bother with any of the armored or armed models sitting in the garage. Instead, she chose a simple speeder bike and kicked it into gear, shooting out of the hangar like a black dart against the orange-grays of the planet.

The landscape of the harsh, almost barren world streaked by, its desert-like heat similar to a blast from an open oven. Vestara already knew what she was going to say to Lord Dals and his followers. Already knew that the outcome would be decided one of two ways.

Either Lord Dals and his followers would side with her.

Or they'd die.

More speeder bikes fell into formation with her, the leader of the group none other than Kaara herself. Vestara acknowledged them with a brief tilt of her head. And then others joined in, the speeder bike formation becoming twelve across on either side of Vestara. Heavily armored troop transports and armed speeders dropped into the wings. Transports dispatched from the *Dark Blade* hummed above, landskimmers filled with silver armored troops were deployed directly in the center of the formation. The sprawling, planet-side scrapyard of Boonta, nearly fifty square kilometers of wrecked starships and other vehicles, loomed ahead. Vestara put more power into her bike's engines, roaring ahead as Tribe fighters paced the convoy.

Vestara could feel the wayward members of the Tribe despite their attempts to hide their presence. However, when the group was as powerful as they were, and were the only living organisms in several kilometers, they definitely stood out. She signaled the small army she led, the group split up, the force on her right looping around in one direction, the force on her left looping in the other. She and Kaara continued straight towards their goal.

It was impossible for Lord Dals and the others to not realize that they had been discovered. The Tribe wasn't exactly being subtle

after all. The remaining Saber, three Tyros, and the dozen or so troopers that had remained loyal to Lord Dals were all in combat positions, using large pieces of debris for cover.

Vestara and Kaara dismounted, unconcerned that they were in the open.

"Tyro Daan, Tyro Kasus, Tyro Sind, good to see you again," Vestara greeted with false warmth. "You do know that pointing a blaster or saber at me is unwise?"

"We're loyal to our master," Tyro Raj Daan replied tersely.

"And Sergeant First Class Varner Gilliar was it?" Vestara addressed the silver-armored trooper in charge of the others. "I spared the lives of you and your men. Pointing those guns at me is making me think that was a mistake."

"I serve Lord Dals," the Sergeant answered unwaveringly.

"Very loyally no doubt," Vestara remarked. "And Saber...I never got your name. You are probably Dals' woman too, correct?"

"It's Saber Suhale," the blonde-haired human answered. "And yes, I am."

"Lord Dals," Vestara addressed loudly, not seeing their master. "This is the end of the road for you. There is only one way you and those so loyal to you can leave here alive. All other ways either involve your death or the deaths of those who serve you. Stop hiding behind them and come out! An orbital strike will be called if you do not."

Emerging from a relatively intact wreck behind the rest, the Tribe Lord of the Sith came out with his hands at his side in a disarming gesture.

"I was not hiding, Vestara Khai." Lord Dals said patronizingly. "I will not return to the Tribe or allow my people to suffer for their loyalty. I just activated a network of reactor cores scattered throughout this scrapyard. Three dozen of them to be exact. All set to overload and create an explosion powerful enough that the other side of the planet will feel it. In less than five minutes every single pawn of High Lord Taalon and Grand Lord Vol on this planet will be incinerated in the greatest hypermatter blast in Tribe history. Didn't your master teach you, Khai, to never trap a predator?"

Kaara took a step forward, her lightsaber starting to rise. Vestara stepped in front of the taller woman, with the barest shakes of her head. Kaara's eyes narrowed, and she took a step back.

"Lord Dals," Vestara addressed with a calmness that belayed the urgency of her situation. After all, if she wasn't successful in convincing the exiled Lord of her cause in five minutes, they'd all be dead. "I am no friend of the High Lord, the Grand Lord, or any of the sitting members of the Circle of Lords. All of them covet power for themselves, believe that any empire the Tribe of the Sith establish should be under *their* control. If the machinations on Keshiri were anything to go by, there will be power-plays, treachery, and shifting allegiances on a scale we've never seen. I want no part in that. I don't want a Sith Empire that contains the same flaws that brought down Empires of the past. You are a learned man, Lord Dals. For you have discovered the Sorcerers of Tund, you have no doubt looked into the past of this galaxy and seen what occurred after our ancestors were marooned. The Empire Grand Lord Vol is trying to build is built on that same sort of thirst for power and destruction. It will be an Empire forever at war with both itself and the rest of the galaxy. But if you ally yourselves to Sabers Vran and Kaara, become an equal in the attempt to build an Empire truly worthy of the Sith, we can establish something that will truly exist for millennia. You know my words are treasonous, know that I have much to lose revealing who my allies are. I regret the death of your son, but it was caused by a relic of those past Sith Empires following a doctrine its masters had programmed into it. Join me, Lord Dals, and together we can change the Tribe, change the Sith, and change this galaxy."

"My lord," Tyro Daan said respectfully. "Vestara Khai *does* keep her word. She did not have to spare Vanri, Talbar, and I when she came across our shuttle. Did not have to protect us from the traps within that temple. She even had Sergeant Gilliar and his people stay behind so that any Force-related dangers did not harm them."

"She is not weak," Tyro Kassu added. "I...I was being a foolish Tyro disrespectful of my station and Saber Khai had every right to take my life. She did not. She could have left us on Tund, trapped in those ray shields, but she did not."

Then, to Vestara's complete surprise, Saber Kaara spoke up. "The fall of Renatasia, attributed to me by High Lord Taalon, was due to Khai's ingenuity and cunning. It would not have happened so effortlessly or bloodlessly if she had not been present. Even my brother owes his successes in part to Khai. And she has done this all

without High Lord Taalon or Grand Lord Vol being any wiser. Her dream may be a foolhardy, impossible one, but she is fervent in her beliefs."

Lord Dals absorbed this information, his expression unreadable as he surveyed each of his people. Finally, he reached into his robes and pulled out a datapad. He inputted a code, and an audible whine and hiss of steam erupted from the scrapyard. "Your word of honor, my people will not be harmed?"

"My word that both *you* and yours will not be harmed by those who share my vision," Vestara inclined her head, inwardly breathing a sigh of relief.

"I will never forgive you for taking the life of my son."

"I would never expect you to. All I expect you to do is to continue to act in a way that will not only benefit this Tribe, but the galaxy as a whole. If we are beneficial to others, we will be welcomed. If we conquer and terrorize, we will only create opposition. It may look as if a sector, system, or planet is under our control, but that peace would be a lie."

"And what would you have me do?"

"We need eyes and ears inside this Galactic Alliance that dominates the galaxy. You and your people will infiltrate the government and send back what information you can to the Tribe. The more we learn about the other players in this galaxy, the better."

"And how will you explain our escape to High Lord Taalon?"

"You co-opted the primitives of this planet and stole a shuttle. We are currently in pursuit and will not return to the rest of the fleet until you are in our custody," Vestara said with a shrug. "Given how easy it was to take their capitol with a couple dozen people, it is beyond believable."

"And you trust that myself and my own will not just run off?"

"You are loyal to the idea for which the Tribe stands for. Want a Sith Empire just as much as the rest of us. Running off will not accomplish it and will make you feel cowardly. Agreeing to assist the rest of us will give you a purpose and turn you into a highly valued asset. When valuable information starts being relayed back to High Lord Taalon and Grand Lord Vol, they will have no choice

but to rescind their execution order and welcome you back to the Tribe."

"You've thought this out?"

"I had a long shuttle flight from Tund to Boonta," Vestara said sarcastically.

"Saber Kaara, you approve of this plan?" Lord Dals looked to the other Saber in the clearing.

"I've developed a sudden case of Keshiri Fire Ear and have lost the ability to hear," Kaara replied monotone. "I should probably go get treatment for it back at the capitol. Should Vestara Khai be involved in anything treasonous, I of course will have to report her to High Lord Taalon."

"Like I said, you get all the reward, I take all the risk," Vestara smirked.

"It will be....interesting, to say the least, to see whether you stay among the living," Lord Dals tilted his head in turn.

"There is a ship fueled and waiting for you on the eastern side of this scrapyard. Can you selectively activate a few of the hypermatter cores from earlier?"

"Yes?"

"Not everyone in Saber Kaara's taskforce has Fire Ear or Cloud Eye. We need to make this look good."

"And here I thought I could save on blaster packs," laughed Sergeant Gillian.

"For the Tribe," Lord Dals remarked dryly, activating his lightsaber and then hitting a few more buttons on his datapad.

"For the Tribe," Vestara and Kaara activated their lightsabers.

The rest of Lord Dals' Force sensitives did the same, the silver-armored troopers shouldering their blasters. The ground shook as several of the hypermatter cores erupted. The shockwave acted like a trigger, and Vestara and Kaara charged as Lord Dals' people opened fire.

DL-III-DL

Sitting on the rooftop of the capitol building, hair still wet from her very reluctant dip in a bacta tank—how was she supposed to know that when she told Lord Dals to make things 'look good,' that the man would detonate most of the other hypermatter reactors he had reactivated nearly killing both her and Kaara in the process—Vestara Khai watched the alien sun dip below the horizon. Boonta was so different from the other worlds she had visited. The harsh, dry climate. The equally dry heat during the day. A world with no redeeming value save for a scrapyard and a podracing circuit. She wondered what Force-forsaken primitive decided that this would be a good world to settle on.

Even the 'cities,' if one could call it that, paled in comparison to the sweeping and angular architecture of Kesh. Boonta was full of blocky metal structures made out of whatever metal the locals could get their hands on, dotting the landscape below her in an unorganized mess. The few towering apartment blocks, such as the one she had launched her attack from a few days earlier, were all clustered around the capitol building. It was almost as if these buildings were shielding those in the capitol from the unsightly mess of the sprawling slums all around. As night fell, most of the city stayed dark, the Tribe's attack on their power infrastructure causing much damage.

She contemplated her situation in disbelief, the Force coursing through her in her silent meditation. If one had told her several months earlier that she'd be defying the Circle of Lords, giving up on glory and fame, and following the advice of a Jedi, she'd have beheaded them. A small, lopsided smirk appeared on her lips at that. If someone told her that today, she'd still behead them. After all, if they knew what she was doing, they'd be a threat and she couldn't very well have them blabbing about it to her enemies.

Even then, she couldn't help but feel a small twinge of doubt. Sure, she had committed to her course, knew it was too late to turn around, but had the Jedi's advice just committed her to an early death? Was she the delusional one who was fooling herself into thinking she knew better than the combined wisdom and knowledge of the Circle of Lords? She was sixteen years of age, would be seventeen this year, yet the Meditation Sphere had chosen her, her Tyros followed her, Vran and Kaara had agreed to a tentative alliance with her. Even Lord Dals had joined her scheming, and she had sensed no deceit when he had agreed to spy on the Galactic Alliance for her.

Her.

Saber Vestara Khai, daughter of Sith Lord Gavar Khai and Internal Security captain Lahka Khai.

"There you are."

Saber Vestara Khai, whose closest person to being her 'best friend' not-so secretly plotted to betray and kill her for his own advancement.

"Saber Raas," Vestara said tonelessly.

"I just thought that you should know, Lord Umarn will arrive in an hour," Ahri said lightly, leaning in the doorjam of the rooftop access. "Grand Lord Vol has been keeping track of Kaara and Vran's successes and was most displeased when they failed to apprehend Lord Dals."

"The Jedi will be here about the same time," Vestara replied, eyes full of raging fire opened. "You truly think the Tribe is ready to take on the Jedi Order so soon?"

"We are Sith. It's our duty to kill Jedi when they appear. Or have you forgotten that in the time you spent with that pet Jedi of yours?"

"Tell me, Raas. Is the Tribe prepared to take on the fleet groups of the Galactic Alliance? Are we prepared to face an army of Jedi? We barely hold one tiny corner of the galaxy. Have a handful capital ships in our control. Most of our forces are bogged down solidifying our control of Centrality. When we kill this team of Jedi, what do you think is going to happen?"

"You're a coward."

"And you're a fool, but that still doesn't change the sheer stupidity of your actions," Vestara snapped, standing. "Lord Umarn will arrive, hopefully before the Jedi do. He'll then do what he can to suppress Vran and Kaara's influence and exert control over the rest of the Tribe's forces. There will be discord, there will be confusion, and those on Boonta who are biding their time will use that to act. If, Force forbid, Lord Umarn arrives, *after* the Jedi, then we will be in for a whole new set of problems. Do you think he'll care about glassing a planet if it ensures that his enemies are defeated? Do you think he'll spare a second thought for the Tribe's forces on this

planet? Forces, whose loyalties the Grand Lord will no doubt already be questioning? Everything was under control, Saber Raas. But you no doubt thought that you were being a good little lapdog, panting happily as you reported our actions."

"Where are you going?"

"Come with me if you want," Vestara said dismissively, storming down the steps that led into the capitol building. "I'm contacting the Jedi."

"You're what?!"

Vestara didn't bother to clarify herself as she stormed down to the bunker-like control room where the leadership had gathered only a few nights earlier. There were a few of the Tribe's people on the computers, coordinating the repair of the power substations throughout the city.

"Get me a list of the comm-frequencies used by the previous security chief. Time-stamped just after our invasion."

"Yes, Saber Khai." One of the technicians accessed the comm-logs and took a few seconds to isolate the outgoing calls. He hit a button, and a list appeared on the holotable.

"Eliminate all local transmissions," Vestara directed.

"Vestara, are you crazy? Contacting the Jedi..." Ahri stopped his protest as Vestara's red blade shimmered centimeters from his throat.

"There," Vestara kept one arm extended to Ahri as she focused on the lone frequency left on the list. "Activate holocoms, use that transmission frequency"

The holotable flickered, and then the image of a Bothan in Jedi robes appeared onscreen.

"This is Jedi Knight Kolir Hu'lya of the Galactic Alliance Guard. You've reached the Jedi-flagged vessel the Menagerie, how can I...oh...wow. I can't believe Solo was actually right...well I can, but still...Judging by your clothing, you would be members of the Sith faction that calls itself the Tribe, correct?"

"Oh? You...know of us?" Vestara struggled to keep her face

impassive as alarm bells rang in her head. The entire goal of the Tribe's offensive was to stay under the radar for as long as possible. If the Jedi Order was already aware of their presence, that didn't bode well for the Tribe.

"People from your faction met some of our apprentices on Formos," the Jedi seemed to have recovered from her surprise and was now looking rather amused. "Judging how you're calling from Boonta, can I assume your people have taken control of the planet?"

"That is correct," Vestara tried to make herself sound as strong and confident as the Jedi. The mentioning of Formos brought back all sorts of memories. Memories and feelings she didn't need at the moment. She focused on speaking modern Basic to try to hide her origins. "Boonta is now under the auspices of the Tribe. Any government entity, Jedi or not, that enters this system without our approval will be treated as hostile and fired upon. I was recently informed by the local politicians that they had requested your help before we took over. That help is no longer needed. Unless it is the intention of the Jedi Order to declare war on the Tribe, you will make no effort to enter this system or land on the planet."

"I have my own orders. I'm sorry, I never got your name."

"You have no need of it," Vestara shook her head.

"Have it your way. I have my own orders, honored member of the Tribe. If you would be willing to grant us permission to enter Tribe-controlled space, it would be most appreciated."

"Jedi have no business with the Tribe."

"My boss disagrees," Kolir made a 'what can I do' sort of shrug. She then leaned forward in her seat, her holo-image growing slightly to adjust. *"You've known we were coming all along, could have set an ambush to wipe us out. What changed?"*

"Nothing," Vestara began, then stopped herself. Already, Doran's words about making allies instead of enemies circling back around in her head. "There are those among the Tribe who would benefit greatly from your demise. I would not be among them should those fortunate individuals succeed."

"I assume one of those who would benefit is listening in. Which is why I can see an active lightsaber but no movement?"

"You assume correctly," Vestara tilted her head, then glared back at Ahri over her extended arm. "However, this one is just an opportunistic scavenger who prefers to follow than lead. Someone of greater importance will arrive around the same time you are due."

"I already have a feeling I know this answer, but was it your people who tried to assassinate Jacen and Anakin Solo on an asteroid almost five years ago?"

Again, Vestara thought about lying, but then dismissed the idea. "The Tribe regained space-flight technology only recently. I doubt most of my brothers and sisters even know who this Jacen and Anakin Solo is."

"But you do?"

"I make it a point to know who I'm going to be fighting before declaring war. Your HoloNet has been of great help piecing together their exploits."

"Do you speak with the authority of the Tribe?"

Vestara arched a fine brown eyebrow. "I am the ranking Tribe member in this room at the moment."

"As the acting leader of your people on Boonta, in that room, can myself and those on the ship with me have permission to enter Tribe held space?"

"You will be destroyed," Vestara said carefully.

"Maybe. Or maybe a...mutual beneficial agreement can be reached."

"And you act with the authority of the Jedi Order?"

"I act on orders to the more open minded of our leadership."

Vestara had to hide a smile at that. Apparently this part of their leadership was in a position similar to hers. She would have been immediately suspicious if this Jedi said that the Order was open to negotiating with the Sith. It seemed that honesty was becoming a good policy. "I cannot guarantee anything from those who do not share my dream of a Sith Empire. But for those that do, I might be...open minded if the agreement benefits the Tribe. Provided you do not get yourselves killed, you have the Tribe's permission to

enter our space."

"Thank you for your generosity, acting Tribe leader."

"Do not make me regret it."

Vestara pressed a button to end the transmission with her free hand, gazing at the five technicians in the room with an unreadable expression on her face. They had heard the entire transmission. Knew that she was plotting treason, literally right in front of them. Though all pretended to go about their business, they couldn't help but glance nervously at the Saber who held a glowing red blade to the throat of one of High Lord Taalon's people.

Common sense dictated that she should kill them all and blame it on disgruntled spice miners or remnants of the old regime. Three technicians were Keshiri, one a human, and the other a local non-human. It wouldn't have been too big a loss. Yellow eyes darted to Ahri, who hadn't so much as twitched as the saber continued to hum ominously at his throat.

Her arm moved in a blur, her red blade flashing through the air faster than any non-Force user could keep track of. Ahri staggered backwards, gasping at the sudden pain, his hands flying to his face. The aftermath of two fresh saber wounds still sizzled as the Keshiri Saber now bore two streaks of burnt flesh where his lips had once been.

"Everything I do is for the Tribe, Ahri. For our people!" Vestara snarled loudly in her native Keshiri Basic, losing her patience with someone she had once thought of as a friendly rival. *"Everything.* I couldn't care less if I remain a Saber forever. As long as the Tribe grows, as long as the Tribe prospers, that's enough for me. If you can't see that, then maybe I should have blinded you as well. As it is, perhaps you can remember it the next time you start blabbing to High Lord Taalon."

"You're consorting with Jedi," Ahri hissed through clenched teeth. "Don't you realize that it's *you* that has gone mad? How is siding with Jedi against members of the Tribe *for* our people?"

"Give me a reason," Vestara replied stonily. "A reason why I should not kill you right now."

"You have to be kidding me," Ahri said incredulously.

"The only joke in this room is you," Vestara growled back. "Grow up, Ahri! Your obsession with status is going to get good people killed!"

"You never had to worry about status!" Ahri snapped back. "You were born human! Born with the Force! Your parents are descended from the original Tribe! I was born in the slums! Born Keshiri! I had to scrape and claw my way out! I had to worry about whether my adopted family would throw me out for not advancing their status fast enough! I had to worry about the Grand Lord's saber because my stupid adoptive parents fell out of favor! You say I'm obsessed with status? Of course I am! On Keshiri, someone like me without any status is consigned to menial labor, to target practice, to working in the mines! You never had to worry about that at all! The furthest you could ever fall as a human Force-sensitive, pure-descendant of the Firsts, is still lightyears above whatever station I could hope to achieve in decades of effort on my own!"

"I don't know if you've realized it, Ahri, but we're not on Kesh anymore! Those scrambling for whatever scraps of power on Kesh is over! We are Tribe, we are in a galaxy with thousands upon thousands of star systems, we make our own power!"

"This is *exactly* what that Jedi 'slave' of yours wanted! He wanted to sow discord among the Sith. Wanted you to turn against the rest of us. There's still a chance to do the right thing, Vestara."

Vestara exhaled loudly and deactivated her lightsaber, dejectedly shaking her head. "Get on a ship, Ahri. Get on a ship and don't let me see you again."

"You're going to regret this, Khai."

"Leaving you alive? More than likely," Vestara answered back. "But if you're going to bring the galaxy down on our heads, we need every member of the Tribe possible. Even the stupid, incompetent ones."

"Saber Khai," one of the technicians interjected nervously.

"What?"

"You...you only turned off the visual part of the transmission, audio is still active," the tech pointed to the device. "The communication's system is an older one. Both buttons need to be pressed to end the transmission completely."

"Thank you," Vestara returned through clenched teeth. She shot one more glare at Ahri. "What are you still doing here, Saber Raas? If you're still on this planet in ten minutes, I'm activating the turbolaser defense grid. Go!"

Still holding his burned mouth, Ahri scowled at Vestara and silently retreated from the bunker.

Vestara whirled back to the communication's terminal. "I hope you got an earful, Jedi Hu'lya. Saber Vestara Khai, out."

DL-IV-DL

Jedi Knight Kolir Hu'lya sagged back in the pilot's seat, unable to believe what had just unfolded. She dropped the ship out of hyperspace shortly before reaching the Dernatine system, and then rubbed at her face tiredly. She hadn't been the only GA Jedi to doubt Anakin Solo's plan. Most of the Jedi didn't believe there could be more than one Sith faction running about. After all, with Palpatine's downfall and the defeat of the myriad of 'Sith Lords' that had popped up afterwards, the Sith had all but vanished from the galactic stage. The idea that more than one group of dark Jedi could scheme and move about unnoticed by the Jedi Order was hard to stomach.

But faced with the proof, she couldn't deny that maybe Anakin and Jacen's paranoid moves behind the scenes now had some merit.

She tabbed the holocom again. "This is Wild Bantha to Hero Boy, Wild Bantha to Hero Boy. I've been invited to a party, Skywalker's old friends. Requesting ideas for a gift."

"Hold a moment Wild Bantha, patching you through."

"Thanks Science Girl."

"*This is Hero Boy*," Anakin Solo's voice came back over the comm with an obvious grimace to it.

"Are you clear to speak?"

"Just getting ready for Coruscant's grand reopening. I'm on the Veila."

"I ran into Skywalker's friends," Kolir repeated. "You were right. On all counts."

"How is it I don't mind when my wife is right, but it annoys the heck out of me when I am?" Anakin groaned in turn. "Never mind, don't answer that. And it was a rhetorical question Veila!"

Kolir smirked. One of the reasons she had signed up for the GAG was because she was of the mind that the Jedi should be doing more to safeguard the galaxy. As a member of the Bothan race, who tended to be proactive and aggressive, she didn't just want to wait around for a threat to rear its ugly head. She followed Anakin *despite* his accomplishments, not because of them. He too knew that the galaxy was a dark and dirty place underneath the veneer of civility. He had seen the growing threat of the True Victory Party on Bothawuii, while the Senate and leaders of the vaunted High Council debated and bickered over freedom of speech and political sovereignty. It was how she Yaqeel had even made it off the planet in the first place. Anakin didn't micromanage any of the missions of his operatives either, preferring instead to toss an active detonator into a munitions depot and see what happened. Or if the situation called for it, exposing a fire to vacuum to snuff out a flame. "Your orders, boss?"

"When you say 'all counts'..."

"Completely separate party from the ones that threw that surprise bash for you five years ago," Kolir confirmed. "The representative I spoke to said something very interesting. Something about only regaining spaceflight technology recently."

"Is this representative someone we can negotiate with in the future?"

"I believe she's in a similar situation you are in. Her viewpoint appears to be in the minority if what I overheard was correct. We might be able to negotiate with her, but at the same time those higher up will more than likely overrule her. She seemed to be around the same age as Skywalker, but I'm a Bothan and it's hard to tell age with you humans."

*"Okay...Blast, these more than likely aren't the Sith we're looking for. It also means that the group we **are** looking for is more than likely going to act soon. They've been off the radar for far too long and this reopening of Coruscant is much too tempting a target. Kolir, I'm leaving the negotiations up to you. I'm not where you are so you're going to be the better judge of things. Just know that the galaxy will probably go to Kessel in a handbasket, and soon. The fewer Sith running around trying to kill us, the better. If we can reach a settlement, my brother and I can convince the Senate to recognize the authority of the Tribe in the Outer*

Rim territories that they have claimed."

"I copy, Hero Boy."

"Do you operatives really have to use that call-sign?"

"Tahiri's orders," Kolir said with a toothy grin.

"She's not part of the GAG command structure."

"Is that an argument you really want to have with her?"

"Never mind, carry on."

"Yes, sir. Hero Boy, sir."

Anakin's sigh was audible as he smiled at her in turn and ended the call. Kolir was just closing up the holo-transmitter when she felt her fellow Bothan Jedi behind her.

"Yaqeel."

"Kolir."

Kolir moved to pass Yaqeel in the doorway, but Yaqeel held out a hand to stop her.

"Yaqeel?"

"Did I hear right? Anakin's ordering you to negotiate with dark Jedi?"

Kolir paused, the disbelief and hostility radiating from her fellow Bothan not exactly unexpected. "Yaqeel, do you trust Anakin to do what's best for the Galactic Alliance?"

"I..." Yaqeel hesitated, then slowly shook her head. "At one time, maybe. But both he and his brother have been increasingly militarizing the Jedi Order, consolidating political power. Twice in the past year alone, bills that were sponsored by the High Council went down in flames in the Senate because Jacen and Anakin voiced their opposition to it. Five times, a bill opposed by the High Council got approved by the Senate, and not just approved, but with enough votes to overturn an executive veto! Just look at the G.A.G! Look at the fleets of ships and fighters they've accumulated! We're not a military force, Kolir."

"Then maybe we should be," Kolir returned, trying to keep her voice low. "How many times has the galaxy come to *our* aid when we need it? How many times did we come to the galaxy's aid because the galaxy was too corrupt and timid to do anything? The Vong War, the Tion Civil War, the Killik War, and countless other engagements. Every single time, Jedi were lost. Every single time we had to beg and plead for ships to support us. If it wasn't for Anakin, Jacen, and Jaina, we'd have all been sacrificed to the Vong. We were just kids then, closer to Tahiri's age. And yet she and the Solos ended the voxyn on Myrkr, turned the tide of a war that nearly had the entire galaxy set to turn the Jedi over to save their own skins. The Tion Civil War? The Galactic Alliance Senate was so paralyzed by inaction that they couldn't stomach their own military getting involved. Who'd they send instead? The Jedi. Waxarn Kel's people. The Killik War? Only three of every ten ships that went out made it back. Ships that only went out because Anakin and Jacen and Jaina had to convince governments to do it on behalf of an entire, ignorant galaxy! Now look at us! Look at the G.A.G! We have teams of Jedi commandos with not only the skill-set and mind-set to do what has to be done, but also the logistics, the support, and the backing of entire fleets! I'm not the only one who feels this way, Yaqeel. Why do you think nearly half the Jedi Order has joined the G.A.G? The older ones have seen war and know what the galaxy is truly like. The younger..."

"See an example of a tyrant seizing power, and want that exact same power for themselves," Yaqeel cut in. "They want the glory, the adventure, the fame of their own holovid in every store. Solo is leading all of you on a dark path, one I won't have any part of. I'm not the only one who feels that way, why do you think a *majority* of the Jedi Order still listens to the High Council, to Grandmaster Skywalker?"

"And your solution to these dark Jedi on Boonta is to go there and try to kill them?" Kolir retorted, her frustration at being unable to make Yaqeel see the truth about what was happening boiling over. "What sounds more dark, negotiating with them to save lives, or trying to wipe them out?"

"Dark Jedi exist to empower themselves and eliminate anyone who does not benefit them. Have you forgotten that a Jedi's graduation to Knight or Master involves celebration and praise, and that a dark Jedi gets promoted after first killing someone dear to them, and then killing their own master? Stopping the dark Jedi here on Boonta will save countless others from the suffering the dark Jedi will bring with them."

"Your close-mindedness blinds you."

"And your arrogance blinds *you*. Centuries of Jedi Masters warn about the dark side for a very good reason. Are you going to tell me that Anakin, you, and all the others that follow him know better?"

"Can you keep at a dull roar? Some of us are trying to meditate."

"Barv!"

"Bazel," Kolir blinked, having not noticed the Ramoan Jedi Knight casually reclined on the lounge in the central chamber. How she missed the green-skinned, pig-like Jedi, she didn't know, and she mentally chastised herself for letting her guard get so low.

"Barv," Yaqeel turned to her childhood classmate. "Anakin Solo just gave orders for Kolir to negotiate with the dark Jedi on Boonta."

"And you're yelling, why?"

"You can't negotiate with dark Jedi."

"Do we know anything about this group?" Barv said idly, strolling over to the mess and preparing himself a plate of food.

"The leader on Boonta contacted me," Kolir said stiffly. "They are the same group Jun and his friends met two years ago. They also appear to have some sort of internal power struggle unfolding."

"Great, let them off each other," Barv drawled, waving a drumstick around in emphasis. "Have you tried this roasted Porg? It's delicious. We need to thank Jiro the Hutt for..."

"Anakin believes that them offing each other is not in our best interest," Kolir interrupted impatiently. "Whatever side wins will still see the Jedi as enemies unless we do something about it."

"Sticking our noses in dark Jedi power-struggles doesn't seem fun or safe," Barv said soberly. "Kolir, we do have three Jedi Apprentices onboard. Almost two-dozen crew. And even though this is a frigate, it's still a single ship. Wouldn't it be better to back off and wait for the dust to settle before trying to negotiate anything?"

"It would, but in this case, the losing side would be the one open to negotiations. The winning side won't be."

"So not only are we sticking our nose in dark Jedi business, we'll be supporting the underdogs?"

"The underdogs in this case won't commit to anything unless they're sure they're going to weather the storm," Kolir shook her head.

"Typical," Yaqeel scoffed.

"I say we get the apprentices out here and take a vote," Barv gestured towards the dorms. "And not just the Jedi vote either. This ship has a crew of twenty others who support the Jedi Order. If we're going to endanger their lives, they should have a say too."

"We don't live in a democracy, Barv," Kolir objected. "There is much more at stake than compromising Yaqeel's precious morals or this single group of dark Jedi. Anakin believes that an attack on Coruscant is imminent, an attack by another group of dark Jedi. If we don't have this part of space secure, then we're going to have two groups of dark Jedi marauding about."

"Anakin will say anything to cling to power. It's why the Chief of State removed him from his post as head of the G.A.G."

"Damn it, Yaqeel, use your senses! There's a growing darkness in the galaxy, everyone can feel it! Do you really think this backwater group of dark Jedi taking over a scrapyard planet is the cause of it? If you guys won't negotiate with them, then I'm taking the A-wing and this is where we part. I don't have time to argue, or vote, or do any of the time-wasting things the High Council does when they want something urgent done."

"I'll take the other A-wing," Jedi Apprentice Jun Rasi Tuum spoke softly from the nearby hallway. "If these guys *are* the same, then I want a rematch."

"Name Vestara Khai ring any bells?" Kolir tossed out. "I don't remember seeing it in the report."

Jun's head tilted. "Think Ben mentioned she was in charge of the group we met on Formos. And wasn't Josat the one who contributed to the report? The Chief of State didn't want Ben or Kani or the others saying anything on the record."

"Good point. And Jun, the only rematch that'll happen is if things go really, really wrong."

"No one is taking the A-wings anywhere," Yaqeel glowered. "Any action will be done as a team. We can't allow ourselves to be split just like the dark Jedi. *Especially* if this group is not the biggest player out there."

"What do you want to do?" Barv asked, lounging on the couch.

"We enter the system in stealth mode, use our sensors to try and get a read on things," Yaqeel answered. "We need intel on these people. Whether it's to negotiate with our lightsabers or our words, we have to find out more."

"Agreed," Kolir said curtly. "And then?"

"And then..." Yaqeel let out a frustrated breath. "We let the Force guide our actions. In any case, make sure you double check the charges on your blaster and have your lightsabers handy. I'm not going to take any chances."

DL-V-DL

"Lord Umarn's ship is dropping out of hyperspace!"

Vestara watched impassively as an *Imperial*-class Star Destroyer emerged, its streaking profile still bearing some of the damage it had received in its defense of Centrality. With the small pocket of space pacified, Centrality's surviving vessels had been folded into the Sith Armada. Among them were four Star Destroyers that were all newer and in better shape than the *Dark Blade*. Fortunately or not, only the *Regent* had arrived, along with two escorting frigates.

"Sensors show another shuttle approaching the *Regent*."

"It's Saber Raas," Kaara said tonelessly at the head of the *Dark Blade's* bridge. "You should have killed him."

"Maybe," Vestara said noncommittally. Having the Jedi in play was a wildcard that could backfire spectacularly. If the group of young teenage Jedi she had encountered two years ago had been any indication of the sanity of the modern-day Jedi, Doran had merely confirmed it. She didn't like relying on others, but at the same time needed that unpredictability of the Jedi if she was going to get all her allies out of this latest bind.

"Receiving holo-communications from Lord Umarn."

"Saber Khai, your call," Kaara ceded.

"Ignore it," Vestara said after a moment of thought.

Those on the bridge all looked to her in varying states of alarm and disbelief.

"You...want me to ignore a call from Grand Lord Vol's most trusted advisor?" The comm-officer paled.

"I thought I was quite clear in my order," Vestara pinned the officer with a cool stare.

The officer looked to Kaara, but the other Sith Saber appeared content in staring out the bridge window. With a shaking hand, the officer turned off the holo-comm array. "Call ignored."

"The *Regent* has raised shields and launched fighters! The frigates are moving to intercept."

"Keep our own shields down and weapons offline," Vestara directed. "Full stop."

"Without shields..."

"Do it!"

The triangular Sith fighters employed by the Tribe roared past the bridge tower of the *Dark Blade*. The two frigates positioned themselves on either side of the bridge tower as well. But when the *Dark Blade* remained passive, not even activating its engines to maneuver, the threat pulsating in the Force lessened considerably. The Force-sensitives on the bridge, Vestara and Kaara included, visibly relaxed at that, some emitting weak chuckles of relief.

Lord Umarn's Star Destroyer decided to close the distance once the situation appeared to be under control. It hovered over the *Dark Blade*, its large size casting a shadow over the ship, and three more vessels emerged from its hangar bay. Two gunships and a shuttle.

Vestara immediately knew that Lord Umarn was on the shuttle. Also knew that Lord Umarn was pretty peeved at having to leave his flag. That was good. A collected and scheming Sith Lord was hard to handle. An impatient and angry one was easier to deal with.

"Saber Kaara," Vestara addressed her counterpart. "Please remain on

the bridge. You need not bother yourself with this trivial meeting."

"For the Tribe," Kaara said in a thinly veiled warning.

"For the Tribe," Vestara inclined her head in turn. She started for the turbolift, then stopped as if an idea had come to her. "Oh, and if you detect any other vessels entering the system please assume that they are friendly and hold your fire unless they act otherwise."

Kaara didn't reply to that, her emotions locked down beneath her icy cold exterior. Vestara couldn't help but take some small joy in knowing that Kaara would be stewing over the request but not question it because Kaara didn't want to look dumb. Of course, if the Jedi didn't use this moment to act, then Vestara would be the one with egg on her face. But it didn't hurt to be prepared.

Vestara mentally purged herself of any emotion, already sensing that Ahri was on the shuttle with Lord Umarn. Though a large part of her knew that she'd be better off if she had killed Ahri, a smaller, more annoying part of her objected to that idea. Ahri cared for the Tribe just as she did. He wanted advancement, recognition, a Sith Empire stretching across the stars. She had the same priorities, just in reverse. Once she had the Empire, then recognition and advancement would follow. Was Ahri really so different than her? Would she have done the same thing if she had been his shoes? The answers were simple. No and yes. How could she kill Ahri for doing what she would have done if the Jedi hadn't opened her mind to possibilities outside of the Tribe's doctrines?

On the other hand, Ahri was seriously becoming a threat to her own agenda and plans. She had tried to get him to see things her way, but he was too absorbed in the glittering images Grand Lord Vol painted. He was no doubt doing his damndest to bring her down, and if she wasn't careful, all her planning would be for naught. Short of killing him, though, Vestara couldn't think of a way to neutralize him.

"Clear the hangar," Vestara directed as she emerged from the turbolift.

"Ma'am," the deck-officer saluted.

The honor-guard that had been preparing to welcome Lord Umarn departed just as the lord's shuttle began ascending into the hangar. This left Vestara standing alone in the vast room as the shuttle came to a halt in front of her.

Vestara kept herself ramrod straight, her mind closed off, her face expressionless. She knew that the next few minutes would determine if she was truly insane or not. Steam hissed as the shuttle's landing ramp descended, the hydraulics echoing in the empty hanger.

The shining armor of twelve of the Tribe's gleaming red-armored troopers emerged first. They were more than a grade over the regular silver, copper, and blue-armored troopers that made up the majority of the Tribe's ground forces. These were the decorated veterans and officers who were renowned for their intelligence and lethality.

But then, following the twelve, were the elite of the Tribe, four gold-armored troopers. If the reds were kilometers ahead of the silver, then the gold was lightyears ahead of them. Made up solely of humans, they had endured the most brutal training ever. None were Force-sensitive, but the training they had endured would have killed lesser Sabers and Tyros without a doubt. Small in number, hand-picked, Force-conditioned, and unflinchingly loyal, they were even more feared than the black-armored Internal Security Apparatus that Vestara's mother was a part of. They alone were allowed to be the bodyguards of high-ranking Tribe members, but were rarely seen. As a rule, you didn't *want* to see them. Death more often than not, followed their appearance.

Last out of the shuttle were four Sith Masters, Ahri, and then Lord Umarn himself.

"Lord Jesko Umarn, welcome to the *Dark Saber*," Vestara bent a knee in slight deference to the man.

"The troublemaking Vestara Khai, I have heard a lot about you," the aged human Sith Lord said in a jovial, almost grandfatherly way.

"Oh?"

"Yes, Saber Raas had much to say."

Vestara was not fooled for a second. There was malice in the man's eyes, his smile glacial cold. "All true, I suppose."

Now it was Umarn's turn to arch an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Ahri, who had been standing next to Umarn, seemed just as taken aback as his superior. "You're going to admit collaborating with the

Jedi?"

"Why not?" Vestara shrugged. Despite her neutral tone, her heart was hammering. "Might as well also say that I plan to overthrow Grand Lord Vol and the Circle of Lords too. That's equally believable, right?"

"You are saying...I was misinformed?" Lord Umarn said carefully, his gaunt face regarding Vestara analytically.

"No, Lord Umarn. I'm sure whoever was informing you about my actions believed that a mere Saber, already disgraced in the eyes of High Lord Taalon and hated by the Grand Lord, has the means and ability to plot a coup against the entirety of the Tribe. I'm sure that said person also believed that others would deliberately place themselves in harm's way on my behalf, risking the wrath of the Grand Lord and Lords such as yourself. After all, I'm clearly a powerful threat to the Grand Lord, even without the Meditation Sphere, this far away from Kesh and the Tribe's armada. Then again, as you are well aware, Keshiri are prone to hysterics and exaggeration if it means advancement in our society."

"And your holo-call to the Jedi from this Boonta you were on?"

"It was a trap, of course," Vestara sighed, shaking her head and shooting Ahri a pitying look. "Any fool with a brain could have seen that. By reaching out to the Jedi and pretending to be a sympathetic ear, pretending to be one of the oppressed and downtrodden, they'll be more than willing to lend us a hand. When they arrive with their guard down and their hands extended, we behead them. Of course, that might be more difficult now that you are here, my Lord. They would have sensed your powerful presence and have second thoughts about their actions."

"A very clever plan," Umarn said without emotion.

"It was Saber Anyul's idea, my Lord," Vestara allowed, mentioning another Saber on Vran's team. "She was injured on Tund and has had much time to think while onboard this ship. It was her idea to pretend to be helpless so that Jedi would rush to our aid. I only implemented it ahead of schedule because Saber Raas told me of your arrival."

"Ah, yes. Tund. You wouldn't happen to know where Lord Dals went, would you?" Umarn questioned in a false, grandfatherly way. "I find it hard to believe that a single Sith Lord could evade every

single resource you had available."

"My lord, Lord Dals was accomplished enough to break away from High Lord Taalon's fleet," Vestara pointed out. "And High Lord Taalon had dozens of frigates, had the *Omen* and other capital ships at his command. He had Sith Lords and Masters, the best of the Tribe with him, and yet Lord Dals was able to hide his intentions and escape. What was I to do with a bunch of untrained alien primitives and a single ship out of date by modern standards? Both myself and Saber Kaara nearly died in the blast Lord Dals set off during his escape."

"You offer only excuses thus far," Umarn said unsympathetically.

Vestara's eyes flickered to her Keshiri childhood training partner. "Then perhaps it would interest you to know that the non-human scum we were counting on to pin Lord Dals in was commanded by none other than Saber Raas."

"What? That's a lie!" Ahri objected.

"I find it interesting how Saber Raas is the one to run to you to report all sorts of tall tales about my supposed ambition, when he is the one most to blame," Vestara continued, ignoring Ahri's outburst as her cold dark eyes held the Sith Lord's equally unflinching gaze. "On Tund, he was the pilot of the shuttle that picked up myself, Saber Vran and the others. Yet, he did so after letting Lord Dals' shuttle go free. On Boonta, he was in charge of coordinating the non-human security forces to apprehend Lord Dals. Again, Lord Dals escapes. Now, after Sabers Kaara and Anyul laid a carefully planned trap for the Jedi, it is Saber Raas who once again blunders into things far greater than his primitive mind can comprehend. Search my words, Lord Umarn, you will find no deceit from me. Search Saber Raas' mind and you will see his ambition and his failure. He intended to use me as a stepping stone for both himself and his dead master's faction. No doubt wished to supplant one of the Grand Lord's advisors in the Circle of Lords. How else would a Keshiri advance if not through deceit and treachery?"

Lord Umarn very slowly broke eye-contact with Vestara, turning his full attention to the now pale Saber at his side. "Yes or no, is what she said true?"

"No! None of it is true!"

"Explain Tund."

"She..." Ahri trailed off before his mouth could get him in trouble. Vestara fought back a smug smile at his hesitation. Of course he could admit that the real reason why he held his fire was because she had told him to. But doing so would also reveal that he had gone against High Lord Taalon's orders in the first place. Gone against the High Lord in favor of her own agenda. It may have been a self-preserving action at the time, but it definitely would not help him now. "She held a *paraang* to my throat. At the time, I thought it prudent to pretend to go along with her plans so I can discover just how far her treachery had extended."

"And Boonta?" Lord Umarn's voice revealed nothing about his thoughts.

"I was in the command bunker of the capitol building," Ahri relayed. "At the time Vestara didn't want me anywhere near the junkyard Lord Dals was taking refuge in. I was in charge of relaying communications between the different units, nothing else."

"Do you intend to use her as a stepping stone as she has said?"

"I...What I do is for the Tribe. Her actions are clearly against it."

Lord Umarn stared at Ahri for several long moments, the hangar deathly quiet. He then looked back to Vestara, his face remaining unreadable. "I believe you."

As Ahri exhaled in relief, Vestara felt her anxiety spike. The Keshiri shot Vestara a sly look as he started to smile. "Thank you, Lord Umarn. There is no doubt why the Grand Lord looks to you for advice."

The Sith Lord's next words wiped Ahri's smile off his face. "I believe you would do anything to advance within the Tribe. That if the opportunity presented itself, you'd stab the Grand Lord in the back if it benefited you."

"My lord, I'd never..." Ahri took several frightened steps back as two gold-armored guards stepped to either side of him.

"Silence," Lord Umarn didn't need to raise his voice, nor return his gaze to the Keshiri Saber. "The only reason you are not dead is because you are as incompetent as you are foolish. Your current vitality may still be forfeited once the Grand Lord learns of your failures. Return to the shuttle and..."

"My lord, if I may," Vestara interrupted.

Lord Umarn stopped and arched an eyebrow at the teenage Tyro. "Choose your next words carefully, Vestara Khai. You are not so innocent as you portray yourself to be, I think."

"My lord," Vestara inclined her head in deference. "Saber Ahri Raas may be a foolish incompetent, but he is still a skilled-enough fighter. If the Tribe is to go to war, we will have need of his abilities."

"'We'?"

Vestara took in a deep breath, unable to believe the words she was going to say next. "The Tribe, my lord. I recommend Saber Raas stay aboard this ship, under the supervision of Sabers Vran and Kaara, two Sabers known for their fierce loyalty to the Tribe and those who lead it. If he were to return with you, those in the Circle of Lords who back the growing Keshiri faction would surely use Saber Raas for their own means. At the same time, those against the Keshiri growing any more powerful would push for his execution. With the Tribe on the verge of war with the galactic powers, we can ill-afford such internal strife."

"Not so innocent indeed," Lord Umarn said with a calculating stare. "Your words have merit."

"Everything I do is for the Tribe."

"Not a falsehood either. You are an interesting person, Vestara Khai. I will let the Grand Lord know that you are worth further watching."

"I am honored."

"Saber Raas, you will remain on this ship. Whether you live or die will be up to Master Kaara."

"She's only a Sab..."

"High Lord Taalon has approved her advancement in light of...*her* successes," Lord Umarn continued, not looking away from Vestara. "I can only hope she will continue to live up to her reputation."

Vestara allowed a ghost of a smirk to form on her scarred lips. "Don't worry, she will."

DL-VI-DL

"Get ready," Jedi Knight Kolir Hu'lya held up a hand.

"[I still don't understand what we're waiting for,]" Duros Jedi Apprentice Melari Ruxon croaked back in Huttese.

"You'll see. Just make sure the torps and heavy-rocket launchers are ready to go."

"This is crazy. The course you've plotted has us jumping in the firing range of two Star Destroyers," Yaqeel hissed. "I know you have faith in our people's tech, but a Bothan Assault Frigate will not last long against that sort of firepower."

"Once we jump in, we'll be trapped by Boonta's gravity well," agreed Barv.

"We all felt that powerful Sith in the shuttle," Kolir looked to the others. "Do you really think he left his shiny *Imperial*-class Star Destroyer to transfer his flag to that beat-up *Victory*-class?"

"And your immediate response is to have us engage this 'Tribe'?" Jenet Jedi Apprentice Reevo Swen blinked. "I think I must have missed this part of the Jedi handbook on Ossus."

"G.A.G rule number five," Kolir quipped back. "Dark Jedi love power-vacuums, unless you're the guy or girl getting offed and creating said vacuum. Jun's dark Jedi buddy..."

"Hey, she's Ben's buddy, not mine," the Cathar said in protest. "Though, come to think of it, I feel the other one also on that Star Destroyer."

"Skywalker's dark Jedi buddy is on the Star Destroyer the big bad Sith went down to," Kolir corrected. "She's the one willing to not shoot at us."

"So you're risking our lives on the off-chance that a dark Jedi will actually keep their word? What have you been drinking?" Barv said incredulously.

"One moment," Kolir glanced back down at the sensor panel as a single shuttle emerged from the *Victory*-class Star Destroyer. "Okay, powerful Sith is aboard. Reevo, take us in. Melari, the moment we emerge from the micro-jump I want you to fire everything we have

at that shuttle."

"But what about those Star Destroyers?"

"We'll worry about that when we have to."

"What'd you do, go to the Anakin Solo School of Craziiness?" Yaqeel squawked.

"Jump us in, now!"

Reeqo glanced back and forth between the three Jedi Knights, then shrugged. "Always wanted to be like Anakin Solo."

The *Menagerie* emerged out from behind one of Boonta's moons and darted into hyperspace. It re-emerged into real space a split second later, directly underneath the *Victory*-class Star Destroyer and behind the shuttle and its two-gunship escort. At the exact same moment, thanks to the coordination allowed to them by the Force, the Duros apprentice let loose the full complement of the assault frigate's arsenal. Rockets meant for blowing holes in capital ships, torpedoes meant for shredding powerful shields, fast-fire laser cannons, all flared out at once.

The shuttle and those in it, though they had felt the growing threat in the Force, had mistakenly thought that the source emanated from the Star Destroyer they were leaving. They had only milliseconds to register the arrival of the Jedi Order's frigate before the plethora of deadly incoming fire completely obliterated the vessel.

The backlash from powerful Force-sensitives rejoining the Force was immediate.

"I think we got him," Barv deadpanned. Even as he spoke, the two gunships had looped around and were now firing on the *Menagerie* with vengeance.

"Tribe frigates and that shiny Star Destroyer are moving into position," Yaqeel reported from the sensor console.

"Take us into the *Victory*-class' hangar," Kolir directed. "Do it before they close the hangar doors."

"On it," Reeqo complied dutifully.

"Kolir?"

"This is to prevent Ben's little friend from backstabbing us," Kolir said dryly. "By entering her ship, we turn it into a target too."

"What's to stop her from blasting us and taking credit for avenging the dead Sithy?" Barv asked.

"We're worth more to her alive. If we die, she commits the Tribe into a war with the Jedi Order. The Tribe isn't ready for it so she won't let that happen."

"And then what?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Jun groaned, hanging his head. "We become a part of Ben's friend's faction until contact with the Jedi Order is made."

"That's crazy," Reevo gasped.

"It's Anakin's plan."

"I don't want to be like Anakin Solo anymore," Reevo groaned. "Oh, we're entering the hangar now."

"I definitely want to see how Ben's friend talks her way out of this mess," Yaqeel said drolly. "Because if she can't, we're all dead."

DL-VII-DL

Vestara didn't wait for the turbolift doors to open before she made her way onto the bridge. Out of all the plans she had anticipated from the Jedi, blowing up Lord Umarn's shuttle with Lord Umarn inside hadn't been on her list of crazy things they could have done. Jedi were supposed to be above violence, assassinations, direct confrontation. Yet, the Jedi vessel had dropped out of hyperspace and vaped one of the Grand Lord's closest advisors, more than likely someone the Grand Lord considered a friend.

First Doran, and then this group of Jedi. Why couldn't she meet a *regular* Jedi for once? Someone she can mock as they preached pacifistic ideals and made the light side of the Force sound like a paradise. Someone who eschewed danger and let the laws of others restrict their actions. Those good, doctrinal Jedi that all her history lessons said existed. Couldn't the Force just give her that much? But noooooo, she had to get the unpredictable Jedi. The crazy Jedi.

And then the chaos on the bridge snapped Vestara from her self-

loathing.

"The *Regent* is moving into attack position now! The *Ferros* and *Death Rite* are taking up flanking positions and releasing fighters!"

"Shields are raised and weapons are active. The Jedi frigate is making no further hostile actions."

"Saber Kaara, should we deploy the fighters?"

"It's Sith Master Kaara now," Vestara cut in with a firm and loud voice. Immediately the bridge fell silent. "Lord Umarn told me that High Lord Taalon had agreed to promote the former Saber due to her accomplishments and battle acumen. Show her due respect."

Kaara, who had been staring out of the bridge window, spun around at those words. A single eyebrow rose on an otherwise expressionless face. "Truly?"

"Sith Master Kaara," Vestara bowed her head in response.

"Ma'am!" One of the other bridge crew cried out. "The Jedi vessel just entered our hangar bay!

Vestara closed her eyes, a pained expression flitting across her face. "What?"

"The Jedi vessel, they entered the hangar-bay before the blast-doors could close. There are Jedi onboard this vessel now!"

Kaara regarded Vestara for a moment before snapping off a series of orders. "Have a security team guarding the hangar for now. Hold your fire unless the Jedi emerge from their ship. Inform the *Regent* and the other vessels that we have taken the Jedi prisoner."

"Y...yes, Master Kaara."

"Saber Khai, approach."

Vestara took up a position next to the blonde woman, both gazing out at the stars. "What are your orders?"

"You conspired with the Jedi to kill Lord Umarn?"

"No," Vestara said truthfully. "It appears the Jedi of this era do not hesitate to remove a threat permanently."

Kaara nodded once, then held up her personal communications device. "Vran, activate the planetary defense network. Lock on targets but do not fire until I give the order."

Vestara chuckled inwardly. The crew of the two Tribe frigates and *Regent* were about to be painted by several dozen planetary-defense cannons. Coupled with the loss of Lord Umarn, and confusion about the chain-of-command would be all but certain. "The *Regent* is a very nice looking vessel."

"I concur," Kaara said tonelessly. "I will need someone competent to command this vessel then. You will do."

This time Vestara blinked in shock before quickly recovering. "You honor me."

"Saber...sorry, Master Kaara," a communication's tech interrupted. "Receiving a hail from the *Regent*. They are demanding to know what is happening."

"Saber Khai, your talent for dramatics is needed once more," Kaara gestured to the tech.

"As you command." Vestara moved into range of the holo-cam. Casting a sidelong look to the tech, she directed, "Make it an open address. I want all vessels of the Tribe in this system to hear this."

"At once, Saber Khai."

The holo-cam light glowed blue, and Vestara tilted her head back. "This is Sith Saber Vestara Khai, commanding officer of the *Dark Blade*, subordinate of Sith Master Kaara and Sith Saber Vran. All vessels belonging to the Tribe are hereby now under the command of Sith Master Kaara. Lord Umarn was killed by the treachery of the Jedi under the watchful eye of those who were supposed to keep the Grand Lord's most trusted ally alive. Those on the *Regent*, the crews of the *Ferros* and *Death Rite*, your lives will be forfeit when the Grand Lord learns of this. If you wish to remain among the living, remain in service of the Tribe, you will pledge yourself to Sith Master Kaara and follow her orders. If you wish to take your chances, believing that the Grand Lord will be merciful, that he will believe you were powerless to stop a lone Jedi frigate from destroying his advisor, then feel free to return to High Lord Taalon's fleet in Centrality. Power down your weapons and shields to show your compliance. Jump to hyperspace to show your stupidity. Fire on us to guarantee your death."

Silence followed her announcement, the bridge crew of the *Dark Blade* looking at Vestara as if truly seeing her for the first time. Kaara kept her back to Vestara and continued her space-ward observations. And Vestara just stood in the range of the holo-cam, unflinchingly staring back at all who were listening to her broadcast.

A blinking signal from a nearby station had the tech at said station look up. "The *Death Rite* acknowledges Sith Master Kaara's command, they are standing down."

Another light blinked on, another tech touching his earpiece for a moment. "Fighter squadron Two-Seven-Five, fighter squadron Two-Six-Four, fighter squadron Two-Five-Three all indicating compliance."

"The *Ferros* is activating thrusters. They are attempting to clear the planet's gravity well."

"And the *Regent*?"

"Unresponsive so far, Saber Khai."

"Gunnery crew," Kaara voiced for the first time since Vestara's address. "Target the *Ferros*' engines, ion torpedoes only."

"I did say they could return to High Lord Taalon," Vestara said with mild amusement.

"We need all able-bodied members of the Tribe to fight," Kaara said smoothly, echoing Vestara's earlier comment. "Stupid as they are for attempting to return to High Lord Taalon, they will make excellent cannon fodder."

"True," Vestara allowed.

"Fire."

A streak of four blue-hued warhead spiraled out from the *Dark Blade*'s warhead launchers and impacted with the fleeing frigate. The devastating power immediately overwhelmed the vessel's shields and promptly shorted out all electrical systems on the ship.

"Receiving communications from the *Regent*! They...they're acknowledging Sith Master Kaara as the ranking Tribe officer in system and are requesting further orders."

"Inform them that I will be transferring my flag to their vessel," Kaara said coolly. "Saber Khai will be in command of this ship in my absence. Saber Khai."

"Yes?"

"You have Jedi down in the hangar. See to it that the situation is taken care of before I leave."

"As you commander, Master Kaara," Vestara tilted her head. In all the drama, she had actually forgotten about the Jedi. She bowed low and then walked at a clipped pace to the turbolift. Time to see just how deep she had gotten herself.

I-VIII-I-VIII-I

"This is a terrible idea."

"Well, we're not dead yet, so maybe Anakin isn't as crazy as the HoloNet makes him out to be," Barv said in response to Yaqeel's pessimism.

"He really thought that allying with dark Jedi was possible?" Jedi Apprentice Reeqo asked Kolir.

"He did," Kolir sighed, stretched out on the lounge in the rec-room of the frigate. "His orders to pretty much every G.A.G operative out here is that if we came into contact with dark Jedi, we first had to figure out if they were the asteroid-type or Formos-type. If it was the asteroid-type, we were to report in as soon as possible before moving to stop whatever was happening. If it was the Formos-type, we were to learn more about them. Both he and his brother thought that if there was more than one dark Jedi group running around, they'd either have ideological or political differences. Their goal was to at the very least form a truce with one of those groups to minimize the number of enemies the Jedi Order would have to face."

"[Would the dark Jedi honor any truce though?]" Melari asked.

"That'll be on our shoulders," Kolir gestured back down towards the closed hangar bay. "As long as we're useful to the dark Jedi, they'll continue to honor their agreement. I also got the sense from our comm-calls that this particular dark Jedi sees honor as a big thing. We removed a potential thorn in her side, she returns the favor by not killing us."

"And then what?"

"Then we act as her 'Jedi' experts and tell her all about the Jedi Order. Anything she wants to know, truthfully. She'll be able to sense it otherwise. We remain useful, we remain alive, we keep the dialogue between the Jedi and her faction of dark Jedi open."

"Pragmatic," Barv commented.

"The Solos thought so."

"Heads up, Ben's friend is stepping out of the turbolift," Jun announced, staring through the lounge viewport.

"Show time," Kolir rubbed her hands together and peered out the same viewport. As if having an epiphany, she motioned to the lone human member of the frigate's crew. "Lieutenant Angira, mind being our spokesperson?"

"Jedi Hu'lya?"

"You're G.A.G too, right?"

"Yes, ma'am..." the dark-skinned officer said, hands clasped at the small of his back. He didn't look nervous at all, more quizzical. "But this is Jedi business..."

"Come off it, Solo wouldn't have had you be the token human on this team if he didn't trust your judgment. Your orders are the same as mine, and something tells me that Ben's friend would rather address you than me."

"Wait, what's happening?" Barv said in confusion. "And lieutenant, you're G.A.G too? I never sensed anything."

The officer replied with a faint smile. "Standard G.A.G training. Good to know all that time sitting there thinking of the ridiculous actually paid off. And yes, I'm G.A.G. Not all of us are Jedi, but we all do our part. If you're certain, Jedi Hu'lya, I'll take point."

"Call it a gut feeling, Guila."

"You Jedi don't have gut feelings," he smiled in turn. He then addressed the other Jedi. "I was tasked to shadow Jedi Hu'lya. She was to be the overt G.A.G operative, and with all attention on her, I was to be the covert one. The report from Ben Skywalker's team

stood out in that almost all the attackers were human. The ones on the asteroid were a majority non-human. Another piece of evidence that had the two believe there was more than one faction."

"Given how the Empire is towards non-humans these days," Kolir trailed off, allowing the others to fill in the blank.

"Wow," Reeqo gasped. "Anakin and Jacen really do plan for everything."

"Try to at least," Kolir shrugged. "They knew that the people they were sending out had a high likelihood of becoming dead upon contact with dark Jedi. Most of us thought that they were being overly cautious and paranoid...now I'm glad they were."

"Are there any other G.A.G operatives on this ship?" Yaqeel frowned, gazing at the few dozen others crowded in the rec-room.

"Why spoil the surprise," Kolir quipped, standing and heading for the door. "Come on, let's not keep Ben's friend waiting."

II-VIII-II-VIII-II

Vestara waited patiently as the landing ramp of the frigate lowered. Behind her, in an array of gleaming silvers and copper, was the Tribe's marine detachment onboard the *Dark Blade*. All stood at attention, their weapons secured and their formation disciplined. She doubted the Jedi would try anything now, but then again, she had definitely been wrong about the Jedi in the past.

It was with great interest when the Jedi contingent made their way out of the ship. First among them, however, was a dark-skinned human with no Force-sensitivity. He wore a simple brown uniform devoid of any ranking pin, his bearing definitely military. Following him were six others, all non-human, all Jedi. Vestara refocused on the human, attempting to glean from his thoughts a reason why he was present. She was wholly surprised when she found her mind-probe thoroughly rebuffed.

"Sith Saber Vestara Khai?" The man asked politely, his tone cautious but even.

"And you would be?"

"Lieutenant Guila Angira of the Galactic Alliance Guard."

Vestara recognized the name from the many HoloNet reports she had read during her research of the galaxy's political structure. "Oh? Anakin Solo's secret police force. You are in the same organization as the Jedi I spoke to earlier?"

"Correct, Sith Saber Khai."

"Saber Khai is sufficient enough, lieutenant. You speak for the Jedi behind you as well?"

"Yes, Saber Khai," the lieutenant said respectfully. His closed thoughts made it impossible for Vestara to tell if that politeness hid something more sinister. Though he didn't use the Force, he appeared very intelligent and well-trained in combat.

"You killed a member of the Circle of Lords, our ruling body. What's more, the man was a close confidant of the Grand Lord himself. Tell me why I shouldn't have you all executed right now?"

"Knowledge," the man answered, not at all unnerved by her threat.

"Knowledge?"

"A potent weapon in the right hands," the officer nodded. "My companions and I are willing to tell you and your allies anything you wish about the Jedi Order and the galaxy's politics. In exchange, we request that you spare us."

"What you are suggesting is treason," Vestara said coolly, trying to see beyond the words. "If the Grand Lord learns that I have left the killers of Lord Ulmarn alive, he will kill me."

"Vent our vessel and destroy it in full view of the others, they will assume that we have died with the ship."

"And the lack of deaths in the Force?"

"You have control of a Hutt planet, I'm sure a suitable replacement can be found."

"Wait, what!" One of the Bothan Jedi protested.

"Silence," Vestara directed harshly, annoyed more by the fact that the alien Jedi had interrupted the conversation than her protest. Her annoyance, however, was derailed when she saw the pig-like Jedi subtly slip a few credits to the other Bothan Jedi. She shook

herself and glared at the lieutenant. "It appears that the Jedi you represent do not share your views."

"Anakin Solo does not speak for all Jedi," the lieutenant continued amicably. "Many disagree with his actions. Jedi Saav'etu is one of them. But if the alternative is our death or your death, then sacrifices have to be made."

"We can put this Saav'etu onboard with the 'sacrifices'," Vestara offered, wanting to see what the man did.

"We could," he admitted, seemingly unconcerned. "But she is skilled enough. It'd be a waste."

"I know several people like that," Vestara returned. "Too short-sighted to be useful, too talented to be disposed of. Very well, you and your people will remain on my ship as guests."

"And those you will sacrifice?"

"Convicts, Already sentenced to life in prison by the locals. I figured blowing them up in a frigate will put those lives to better use."

"It will be a pleasure working with you, Saber Khai."

DL-VIII-DL

The long rectangular table on the *Regent* was set up in the room used to receive distinguished guests. The room was located just off to the side of the hangar, giving the occupants a clear view of both the going-ons inside, as well as a dazzling view of the stars outside. The chefs had gone all out with Keshiri cuisine, with the fanciest and most expensive courses all laid out. Seated at the table were the visiting Jedi and select members of the Tribe's forces over Boonta. On one end sat Sith Saber Vestara Khai. On the other sat Jedi Knight Kolir Hu'lyr. Jedi and Tribe alternated seats, with Sith Master Kaara, Sith Sabers Vran and Ahri, and Tyros Airia and Jesdan interspersed among Yaqeel, Melari, Jun, Barv, and Reeqo.

"Your people were really stranded on a planet for several millennia?" Barv wondered softly, his silver goblet stopping before it reached his mouth.

"Yes," Vestara answered with some amusement. "You can imagine our surprise when we learned that the Sith Empire hadn't endured for that time and that it was the Jedi, instead, who ruled the

galaxy."

"[Jedi don't rule,]" Melari argued.

Vestara tilted her head at the Duros, frowning slightly. "I am not fluent in that tongue, though I do recognize it. Huttese, correct?"

"You are right," Yaqeel nodded. "And Melari was pointing out that Jedi do not rule."

"A poor choice of words then," Vestara gestured dismissively. "In Keshiri Basic the word for 'rule' and 'lead' is the same, *rueed*. Being stranded on a world for thousands of years required a...need to adapt. Many words from Kesh's native language were incorporated into Basic."

"Ben did say that your Basic had a weird accent to it," Jun smiled. "I'm glad I know the reason for it."

"You were one of the ones on Formos," Kaara spoke.

"Glad you remember, you're the one that hit me with lightning," Jun remarked darkly.

"Of course I remember," Kaara returned. "Only four people that I have faced in combat are still living. Two of them are at this table."

"Moving on," Kolir said dryly. She held up her own goblet. "Sith Saber Khai, may our alliance prove fruitful and peace between Jedi and the Tribe be a boon to us both."

As the others in the table raised their goblets to match her action, a shockwave rippled through the Force. Jun's goblet fell from his hands, splashing its contents all over the place, but he didn't care. He clutched at his chest, gasping with wide eyes.

"Kani!"

Seconds later, Melari dropped her own goblet as she felt her close friend and fellow Duros Jedi vanish. "Ohali, no!"

"Master Ramis," rasped Barv as he absence in the Force echoed loudly.

More goblets fell as the deaths rippled through the Force, the Jedi sagging back into their chairs much to the bewilderment of their

hosts.

"What is going on?" Ahri asked in stilted modern-day Basic.

Kolir, a hand on her chest and her teeth gritted, looked across the table. "Does this room get the galactic HoloNet?"

Vestara nodded once and activated the console. Kolir quickly flipped to the station she wanted, but instead of the grand reopening of Coruscant, a single figure was staring up into the holocam. One eye yellow, one eye alien in nature, the man's age-worn face was twisted into a cold, cruel smile.

"Citizens of the galaxy, the esteemed Kenth Hamner was right about one thing. This is a new era. The era of power, of strength, of a time where we will rise up and seize control of our destinies and not let another do it for us. A time where the weak are swept aside to make room for progress. For peace and prosperity in my new Empire. Remember my face, my voice, for I am now your next head of state, Darth Krayt. Those who do not fall in line will be swept aside, as progress waits for no one. Citizens of the galaxy, I now usher in a new era. The era of the One Sith and the New Sith Empire."

Silence filled the room at that announcement. The Jedi still recovering, while those of the Tribe digested the fact that they weren't the only Sith with aspirations of an empire.

"Perhaps," Vestara began slowly, looking to Kolir's stricken face contemplatively. Possibilities abounded at the realization that perhaps the Jedi weren't in a position of strength after all. "Instead of the Jedi Order, you should tell us about these 'One Sith,' and why there appears to be more than one of them."

"An alliance between your group and his will not work in your favor," Kolir managed, barely keeping her wits about her as deaths continued to echo through the Force. She could feel the loss of several G.A.G Force-users and knew that it was only the beginning. "Anakin Solo, the man I work for, he would know more. But like any Sith group, they believe that they are superior to all others, will expect the Tribe to submit to them."

"The Grand Lord would not bow before anyone," Vran spoke for the first time.

"Then you would be the One Sith's enemy," Kolir continued.

"If we're not with them, we're against them?" Airia asked.

"Yes," Kolir nodded. "But it is likely that your Grand Lord will find that out the hard way."

"Sith do not like sharing power," Kaara noted.

"You heard this new 'emperor's' speech. Does he seem like the type to welcome the Tribe with open arms?"

The Tribe members took a visual poll of each other, reaching their own conclusions in silence.

"The question now is what we should do with you," Vestara looked to the Jedi. "With your order destroyed..."

"Not destroyed," Kolir interrupted. "Anakin Solo and his brother anticipated such an attack and moved many of our assets to safer locations. The Jedi Order may be weakened, but they are still able to fight. We can still be invaluable advisors if you would let us. Perhaps even handle diplomatic affairs to smooth transitions when the Tribe claims new territories."

"And your Jedi Order would allow this?" Vran scowled.

"They will have no choice," Kolir shook her head. "As I said, Anakin and Jacen Solo were aware of both your existence from your encounter with Ben Skywalker's team, as well as the existence of this Darth Krayt. They are prepared to formerly recognize Tribe control over any Outer Rim territories they claim so long as you keep the whole death and destruction theme to a reasonable level."

"How pragmatic of them," Tyro Jesdan remarked.

"The last thing the Jedi Order wants is a war on two fronts," Vestara said, reading between the lines. "Anakin and Jacen Solo sees the One Sith as a bigger, less reasonable threat. They are perfectly fine supporting the Tribe's expansions because that means they don't have to worry about their flank as well. But what will happen when the One Sith is neutralized?"

"When the time comes, they are willing to make a formal treaty with the Tribe," Kolir answered. "Then hopefully the galaxy will be kept in balance with a part of it 'led' by the Jedi Order and the other part 'led' by the Tribe."

"Do your companions object?" Vestara gazed at the other Jedi, still recovering from the tidal wave of death crashing through the Force.

"We don't," Barv said solemnly. The others nodded in silent agreement.

Vestara then held up her goblet again. Outside the room's viewport, the *Dark Blade* and two Tribe frigates sat in formation, squadrons of fighters maneuvering between the larger ships. In the hangar, legions of silver-armored troopers led by red or copper-colored troopers marched in disciplined formation as they underwent 'training drills'. Walkers captured from Centrality were also on display, technically 'undergoing maintenance'. In another section of the hangar, dozens of Tribe Force-users—from Masters to Tyros—were likewise 'exercising' with their lightsabers and Force-abilities, their movements mere blurs to the untrained eye.

And one by one, Kaara, Vran, Ahri, Jesdan, and Airia, held their goblets up after Vestara, each of them tilting their heads respectfully at her. Vestara's crooked smirk returned. "Then in the name of your Jedi Order, for the well-being of the Tribe, we have an alliance."

DL-Story End-DL

A\N: Well, so ends Vestara's little side-tale. Hope it fleshes out Vestara's character in Fish-verse a little more so a Ben/Vestara in the future isn't so alien! Next week, Side B's next chapter. Posting will then go on a small hiatus. At the moment, both Legacy Side A and B are at chapter 12, Darkened Destiny is at 2, and the next Forging the Future Arc is in progress with three-quarters of the first chapter done.